

YOU ARE A ROLE MODEL NO MATTER WHAT!

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

It is a bit of a scary thought being a role model. It isn't a job we can choose, or apply for. We are role models whether we like it or not!

When our son Jared was about 3 years old he was Daddy's little shadow. He wanted to do everything Daddy did. When Brian was building a block wall on the front of the property, Jared was right there, trying to dig holes and hold things for Daddy. Brian would sit him on top of the dirt piled in the wheel-barrow and take him for a ride down to the back garden where he dumped the dirt. Jared thought that was very cool. When Brian fixed the car, there was Jared, sticking his little fingers on the greasy engine parts. Jared can fix almost anything these days.

Isn't it amazing how children want to copy whatever their parent does? A little girl wants to be Mommy so she helps bake cookies or dresses up in Mommy's clothes. She has her own stroller with her own baby and baby clothes. Stores even have kid-sized carts so they can walk round the store and act just like Mommy. Of course this is a ploy by the store to entice children to fill their cart with things they want Mommy to buy; but it is all part of modeling after adults.

If only kids copied only the positive parent actions and skipped the negative ones! How many times have you caught yourself thinking, "I sounded just like my mother then", and it wasn't a good thing? Kids learn far more than we think by just watching what we do. If our reaction to frustration is to burst out in anger, then a child will do the same. If I use bad language then my child will. I can remember hearing a woman just down the street from us in New Zealand screaming out the window at her kids, "Will you (beep) kids stop your (beep, beep) swearing!" Hmmm! I am not sure how much notice those kids would have taken. Even when kids get older, their default mode is usually how they saw their parents act in a given circumstance.

Your kids can model the behavior of those outside the home. Parents will often despair when they find their kids acting in an uncharacteristic manner. There might be a child at school or down the street who is acting this way, and their child is copying.

When kids are not getting enough positive attention at home, they will often gravitate to where they feel accepted elsewhere. This may mean they spend time at their friends' homes where there is positive attention. It may mean they join gangs and model themselves after that behavior. My brother felt he

wasn't being appreciated at home and left when he was 16 years old to join a motorcycle gang. He felt cared about by like-minded guys.

How can we encourage our kids to meet our behavioral expectations? First of all we have to spell out what these expectations are. Having done that we have to look carefully at how we behave and change accordingly. If possible, we need to have changed before we have any kids so they don't learn bad habits from us.

We, as parents, are the single greatest influence over our kids' behavioral responses. They will model after us until others in their orbit of influence tempt them to act differently. If they are negatively influenced we need to remind them of our family expectations and ensure they adhere to them. We may need to discourage friendships with those who are influencing negative behavior. We need to have a strong set of family values in place that are adhered to by all family members. Kids need to know not only what the expectations are, but why you have them. When they realize how other people's behavior affects them and ultimately you, they will usually want to comply. We need to give our children the love and attention they require so they are not easily swayed by others in a negative way.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.