

Ten Commandments for Parents

Adapted from the book *Building Character in Schools* by Kevin Ryan & Karen E. Bohlin.

Someone has recently quipped that if the Lord waited to the 1990s to deliver to Moses the Ten Commandments, He would have couched them in the spirit of the age and called them the Ten Suggestions. In summarizing our advice to parents, we are harkening back to the language of an earlier era.

The First Commandment: Thou Shalt Put Parenting First

American parents for some time have been on vacation from their children. The results are in and they don't look good. Raising good children, children of character, demands time and attention. Educators have recently discovered that the key to good teaching is time-on-task, the ability to keep the student engaged in learning. Good parents make their children their first work.

The Second Commandment: Thou Shalt Be a Good Example

Face it! Deal with it! It's part of the job. No one likes having continuously to be a "good example," but it just comes with the territory. In fact, you can't avoid being an example—for good or ill. Modern psychologists have discovered what people knew centuries ago, that humans learn primarily from the example of those around them. They learn not only how to walk and talk but also their moral values that way.

The Third Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Carry This Burden Alone

All the people around our children are potential models for good or ill. Although parents are the strongest examples, others influence their moral values and attitudes, too. Brothers and sisters, neighbors, their children, relatives, bus drivers, and especially teachers all influence them. We must be alert to the type of example these people are providing our children and, where we can, arrange the worlds of our children so they are exposed to the best and are safe from the worst.

The Fourth Commandment: Thou Shalt Be Deeply Involved in Thy Child's School Life

Parents are the child's primary character educators, but teachers and the schools are also major players. It is important to know what is going on in your child's school life, from the curriculum to the playground, from the classrooms to the bathrooms. Teachers, in particular, need to know of your interest, and they need to feel your support for their work as character educators.

The Fifth Commandment: Thou Shalt Monitor What Enters Thy Child's Heart and Mind

Good character means developing a sense of what is right and wrong, what is a good person and a weak person. Besides the real people and real events in a child's life that shape character, there are books, television, music, and films that are constantly delivering moral messages to our young. Parents must control the flow of ideas that wash over their child. They must be their own V-chip.

The Sixth Commandment: Thou Shalt Stick to the Basics

Children are not born with good characters and a fully developed set of moral values. They need a long process of learning. Don't start out expecting heroic values or a highly developed moral sense. Teach basic habits of honesty, concern for others, and responsibility. As they grow, focus on persistence, prudence, and justice. Help them build their characters on the firm foundation of basic habits or virtues.

The Seventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Punish with a Loving Heart

Children need limits. They need to know what they can do and what they cannot do. They need rules and procedures. And they will, alas, overrun these limits and break these rules. Reasonable punishment is an aspect of human learning, particularly of forming good character. But children must understand what punishment is for and know that its source is parental love.

The Eighth Commandment: Thou Shalt Use Moral Language

Events should not simply be called "appropriate" or "inappropriate." Behavior that is hurtful to others ought to be labeled as "wrong" or "bad." Human actions that contribute to the well-being of family members and others or to the advancement of the common good should be clearly labeled as "good" and "right." Children cannot develop a moral compass unless the people around them use such language.

The Ninth Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Reduce Character Education to Words Alone

A child should learn early that good character is much more than words—and that "talking the talk" is one thing but "walking the walk" is what counts. Parents Should help children by promoting moral action through self-discipline, good work habits, and kind and considerate behavior toward others and through community service. Children must know that the bottom line in character development is behavior—*their* behavior.

The Tenth Commandment: Thou Shalt Make Good Character a High Priority in Your Home

Parents and children have many pressures on them. They have many demands on their time and many distractions in their lives. The modern world is constantly screaming for our attention, time, and energies. Our children must know that our first concern for them is that they use their formative years to make themselves strong individuals, that they make themselves people of good character.