

Dr Goh Chee Leong, Board of Governors, HELP International School

What kind of man would I like my son to become? What kind of character do I want to encourage in him? What qualities will serve him well as he tries to fulfill his dreams and potential as a young man in the future?

These are the questions I ask myself as a father to a baby boy. I realize that what it means to be man has changed over the course of history. Being a man in the 21st century poses its own unique challenges and my job as a father is to prepare my son to face these challenges.

Upon reflection, I realized that the key is character. A man is defined above all else by his character. Below are some lessons I think would be important to impart on my boy that may help shape his character.

1. Strength should not be used to dominate others

It's unfortunate that we have many instances in our society of males using power, whether it be physical strength or status, to dominate and bully others. We see this being modeled in TV shows, in movies, in stories and sometimes in the home. I have observed this even in some cartoons and children's programs. Extreme examples of this include domestic violence and emotional bullying behavior.

The danger is, when our sons see this, they may consider this normal male behavior. They may grow up with the perception that in order to be a "real man" they need to be aggressive, they need to push others aside in order to get their way.

The issue is how they understand "strength". As a father it is my role to teach my son that real strength is not about dominating others. Real strength is not about having to show everyone just how powerful and mighty we are. In fact, in most cases, it is the weak and insecure person who needs to show the whole world how strong they are. Men who are strong and secure and confident don't need to shout, or to be aggressive, or to humiliate others.

These lessons should start while they are young, in the way they play with their friends and the way they interact with others at home and in school. I need to put across to my son that bullying others is not an act of a strong person, but an act of cowardice. It takes a lot more strength to be kind and accepting of others and to fight for the rights of others rather than your own.

2. Work hard and play hard

Boys have had a reputation for being playful and easily distracted. I'm not sure whether this is a fair observation, as in my observation both girls and boys struggle with this. Nevertheless, it is important that my son learns to live a balanced life.

There is a time to play and a time to work. You need to know when to do which.

I've always believed in being wholehearted in whatever we do. Never do things halfway. When it is time to work, then focus your attention completely on it. Don't get distracted, don't let your mind wander or day dream. This will help you get work done quickly and effectively, and will leave you with time for play. The same thing applies for leisure time; be wholehearted in having fun when it is time for fun. Don't let your mind wander to work when you're with your family and friends.

I need to model this at home. Do I work efficiently so that I have enough time with my son? When I am with my son, am I completely present with him, or is my mind elsewhere?

3. Leadership is putting others first

Many of our cultures talk about the man being the leader or head of the family. While this in itself is debatable, to me the more important issue is how we define leadership, whether it be exercised by men or women.

What does it mean to be a leader? Some men think that leadership means you have the power to do whatever you want. It means that you can order other people around to serve you and to meet your needs and wants. Some men, unfortunately run their families and businesses this way.

What kind of leadership do I want my son to develop?

I would like my son to see leadership as a form of servanthood. Leadership is about serving others and putting others first. As a husband and father, I should look at the needs of my wife and children first. That should be a priority above my own needs and dreams. Similarly in my work, if I want to a good boss, I need to put the needs of my staff above my own. This to me is the essence of true leadership.

So as my son grows up, and as he has opportunities to lead, in his school, among his friends, I hope he will learn to love serving and will see leadership as act of service.

4. **Being a gentleman is more than about how you dress or speak**

Some say that true gentleman don't exist anymore, which I'm sure is a bit of an overstatement. I would certainly hope that my son will grow up into a gentleman. The question of course is what does it mean to be a gentleman?

Is it about how we dress or talk or behave? Is it about being polite and chivalrous? I'm sure that's part of it, but I believe it's a lot more.

The best definition of a gentleman I've heard goes as follows: "a gentleman says what he means and means what he say." I like this definition because it raises the issue of integrity. A gentleman is a person of integrity who 's actions is consistence with his words. He is someone who is trustworthy, who is a man that inspires respect rather than demand it.

Conclusion

I hope my son will learn in time to become a man of good character. In my mind this is more important than how many A's he gets in his exams, or how many degrees he has, or how much he earns in his career. To facilitate this, I as a father will try my level best to be a good role model to him. This is perhaps the most important role I can play.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010