

Character Feedback
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Most parents want their children to develop positive character traits. These traits or virtues typically include things like:

- Honesty
- Self-control
- Respect for others
- Generosity
- Courage

However, in an odd twist of reasoning, most parents use negative feedback to teach children these positive character traits. For example, Marcus wants his son Bruce to be honest and so whenever he notices Bruce bending the truth, he corrects him. He says things like: "Bruce, you know that wasn't the truth" or "You need to stop lying!"

Despite Dad's positive intentions, his negative comments may shape Bruce's character. Bruce may notice his father's displeasure at his dishonesty. Eventually, Bruce's character or identity will take on a negative spin. He may think, "I've got a problem with honesty" or "I'm a guy who doesn't tell the truth."

Character feedback is a means through which parents can help their children recognize and develop positive attributes. It's a strategy that leads children to think of themselves differently, as illustrated in the following example:

By the time she was 6 years old, our youngest daughter (Rylee) had developed a passion for sweets. Recognizing this, Rita, John, and Rylee's older sister (Chelsea) all began commenting, "Rylee has a sweet tooth!" Very quickly, Rylee, when eating candy, stuffed it in her mouth, proclaiming, "I've got a sweet tooth!" It didn't take us long to see that labeling Rylee with this character trait was a very bad idea.

Huddling up, we made a new plan. There was, in fact, minor evidence that Rylee liked broccoli. She would eat broccoli dipped in ranch dressing. The three of us adopted a new mantra. We said things like: "Rylee likes her broccoli with ranch dressing. Rylee is the kind of girl who knows she'll grow up strong and smart if she eats her vegetables."

In less than a week, Rylee affirmed our character feedback. While eating broccoli with ranch dressing, she exclaimed, "I'm a girl who eats my broccoli." At the time of this writing, Rylee (now 22-years-old) still enjoys her broccoli.

The lesson for parents is that since we make statements about our children's character anyway, we might as well consciously and intentionally make these character statements in a positive and hopeful direction. For instance, in the opening example, what if Marcus had taken a positive approach with Bruce? What if he consistently noticed and commented on Bruce's truth telling? What if he said things like, "I love it when you tell me the truth" or "You're the kind of son who I can trust to be honest with me" or "It was so cool when you told the truth about what happened at school."

This doesn't mean that parents should never point out their children's negative behaviors. Sometimes children need direct and corrective feedback. The problem is that if we do that too often, we may unintentionally contribute to the development of negative character traits.

