

Life's Building Blocks, Inc.
Making Character Development Fun



Virtue of the Month – Justice

Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is a little like expecting the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian.

—Dennis Wholey

True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

The precepts of the law are these: to live honestly, to injure no one, and to give every man his due.

—Justinian I

The highlighted virtue for this month is fairness.

There are many nice things we can do for others that we don't have to do. But there are some things we must do for other people—things that are their right as humans. Fair or just people respect the rights of others, consistently treating them as they deserve. Moreover, fair people have good motives: they respect the rights of others not because they want a good reputation, nor because it makes them feel good (though it might!), but because all people have a dignity or sacredness that requires us to treat them with respect.

Three kinds of fairness

Three kinds of fairness—promise keeping, obedience, and consistency—are particularly important for children to understand.

As this month's chapter book illustrates, when we make a promise to another person, we give that person rights. Jarrett promises his mother that he will rake the lawn, so his mother has the right to make him do so. He has to

finish his chore, even if he later finds something better to do. Given the moral seriousness of promising, our children should be careful when they make promises. We must hold our kids accountable to keeping them. If we don't, we will teach our children to be indifferent to—even in contempt of—justice. Of course, we can hardly teach them to keep their promises if we fail to keep our own. As with all moral development, we cannot expect to teach our children virtues that we lack.

Second, some of our obligations result not from the promises we make to others, but from the commands others give us. If Jarrett's mother demands that he rake the lawn, then Jarrett ought to rake the lawn! Of course, it's important that Jarrett's mother be the one who demands he rake the lawn. If Mrs. Hawkins insists that Jarrett rake her lawn, he might do it to be nice, but he certainly doesn't have to. Why? Jarrett's mother has a right to issue commands to him, because she is his parent, while Mrs. Hawkins, who is just an acquaintance, does not. So, just people are also properly obedient; they respect the commands of legitimate authorities. It's crucial that we require our children to be obedient to authority. If we tolerate defiance of legitimate authority, we will breed in them an indifference to, or even contempt for, justice.

Finally, although we make promises to only some people, and only some people have authority over us, we must give everyone *consistently* fair treatment. All people have a right to that. Many children want to be treated in a certain way but might not be willing to treat others likewise. A child who thinks and acts this way, though, is confusing justice with selfishness.

Misconceptions about fairness

Children tend to think that fairness means identical treatment. For example, Carlos's little brother will howl with rage if he doesn't get the same portion as Carlos, who is older and bigger. The house will ring with cries of "That's not fair! Not FAIR!" Sometimes parents make that mistake as well. They think if they get a present for one child, they have to get an equally valuable present for the other. But justice requires something different than treating people the same. It is entirely fair for bigger people to get bigger portions. In fact, rather than treating everyone exactly alike, fairness means that we treat relevantly similar people the same way. That's what Jarrett learns from his conversation with Mr. Lacey in the activity book, when he must decide which of his friends to take to the beach. Jarrett realizes that because Shawnie gets sunburned easily, Jake doesn't like swimming, and Jessica went with him last year, it is fair for him to ask Lauren and Carlos to come.

Wronging others: the dark side of justice

At some point, we will all fail to respect the rights of others. When we do, whether by breaking a promise, defying the commands of a legitimate authority, or unfairly distributing goods, we are guilty of wronging others.

This has serious moral consequences. For example, when Jarrett decides not to help his friends find Rex, he wrongs them. At the very least, he should offer them a sincere apology. But he also has an obligation to make amends as best he can. That's why he runs to the Hawkins Mansion to help find Rex. This idea also applies generally: if Jarrett breaks something in Mr. Lacey's store, then he has violated Mr. Lacey's rights (even if he does so unintentionally) and must compensate Mr. Lacey.

Of course, that's how things look from the perspective of the person who wrongs someone else. But the person whose rights are violated also has to decide how to respond. For example, Jarrett's friends in the Spruce Street Six have the right to hold Jarrett accountable when he doesn't help them look for Rex. Because he wronged them, they can demand an apology. In other cases, the person who is wronged has the right to punish the other person. Jarrett's mother certainly could have grounded Jarrett for breaking his promise to rake the leaves, or told him that he would not be able to enter the pumpkin-carving contest.

Justice and forgiveness

Fortunately, as Jarrett finds, there is a bright side to injustice. When Jarrett breaks his promise to rake the yard, his mother can decide to forgive him—and she does. When Jarrett refuses to look for Rex, the other members of the Spruce Street Six can decide to forgive him as well—and they do. The right to forgive is morally uplifting, but refusing to forgive can be extremely harmful. Without forgiveness, our friendships will grow cold and full of resentment. It is a given that the people we love will sometimes violate our rights, as Jarrett did with his mother and friends. But we cannot live a healthy and flourishing life if we are not willing to forgive.

Therefore, one of the most important things we must teach our children is when to forgive those who wrong them. This is a difficult decision. We must forgive those we love, but we cannot just blindly or dismissively forgive them. Cheap forgiveness—forgiveness without cost or condition—is bad for them and for us. So, we need to be prepared to forgive, but not without repentance.

Questions to ask your children this month:

- *Have you ever been tempted to break a promise in order to make someone happy? Is that the right thing to do?*
- *Give an example of a promise that would be bad to make.*
- *When have you been treated unfairly? How did it make you feel?*
- *Is it ever okay to get angry with someone? Why or why not?*
- *Do you have to obey the demands of every adult? If not, then who do you have an obligation to obey?*
- *Why do you have an obligation to obey some people and not others?*
- *Do you always have to forgive others who have done you wrong and apologized? If not, what else must they do to receive forgiveness?*
- *If you forgive someone who has wronged you, can you still insist that he or she “pay you back”?*
- *Do you have to forget the wrongs that others have committed against you?*
- *Why is it important to forgive others when they wrong us?*
- *Have you ever been forgiven for doing something wrong to another person? How did that make you feel?*