Psychologist offers 6 character-building techniques

Parents today contend not only with yesterday's worries — drug abuse, bullying, teenage sex and delinquency — but many new challenges.

The digital age has introduced adult predators and other online hazards, and body-altering decorating such as tattoos and piercing's are popular temptations, says James G. Wellborn, a clinical psychologist with 18 years of experience working with parents and teens.

"The teenage years are unlike any other in a person's life — it's a unique in-between period from childhood to adulthood, and it's helpful to remember that problems during this time are actually normal. But teens still require guidance, encouragement and good ideas to see them through to adulthood," says Wellborn, author of the book "Raising Teens in the 21st Century: A Practical Guide to Effective Parenting."

A universally admired trait, spanning all cultures, religion and philosophy, is compassion. A truly compassionate teen will inevitably have a host of other positive qualities, Wellborn says, including patience, understanding, sensitivity, tolerance, intuition and more. He says parents can encourage compassion in the following ways:

• **Model it:** Compassion is largely learned, so be aware of how you act around your children. How did you respond to the request for money from that panhandler on the street? What comment did you make behind his back, in the presence of your kid? What did you say about that idiot driver who just cut you off in traffic? Your teens are watching and listening.

• **Notice it:** Point out examples of compassion that occur around you. It comes in many forms. Relevant to our daily lives are the people who quietly, and without recognition, help others in need, including volunteers of all types. Make a game of identifying instances of compassionate deeds you've witnessed.

• **Teach it:** Compassion has to be taught, so be prepared to provide direct instruction on how your teen needs to think and act in order to develop that quality. One important component is empathy. If your teens can't see things from another's perspective, it is difficult for them to appreciate what that person is going through. Help them learn to walk a mile in their shoes.

• **Anticipate it:** Character can be fostered by projecting moral strength into their future. In this way, you will be subtly shaping the adult they are working to become. Say things like: "By the time you're an adult, you will be such a person of strong character. That'll be really cool."

• **Guilt it:** A personal value system serves as a means of accountability to oneself (and your family and community). This begins with the value system parents promote in their kids. If they fulfill the promise of personal values it is a source of justifiable pride. Violating personal values should result in guilt for not doing what's right and shame for letting other people down. Parents need to help their kids along with this.

• **Repeat it:** Once is not enough when it comes to character. Find every opportunity to work it into the conversation. Using all of the strategies mentioned above, you will be able to work character issues into every possible situation in a remarkably diverse number of ways. You need to have mentioned character so often — at least once every couple of days — and in so many different forms that they are sick of hearing about it by the time they graduate from high school.