Helping kids do the right thing

Every parent has the God-given privilege – and responsibility – to help their children form their consciences and learn to do what is right. Often, this also involves correcting them when they have done wrong. Following the example of God, our loving Father, we are called to guide our children with love and mercy. Here are four keys to helping our kids make better choices.

Teach children the difference between sins and accidents. Young children are concrete thinkers and sometimes they may have difficulty understanding motives. This can lead to some confusion over exactly what is a sin and what isn't. For example, children who forget to do something they were asked to do may think they have sinned. Use some "what if" scenarios and ask kids if the situation described would be a sin or an accident. Even better, point out examples in your own family life, such as when something is accidentally dropped and broken, or when a child intentionally disobeys. To help keep the difference clear, try not to get overly upset or punitive about mistakes, but also point out that feeling sorry about a wrong choice we have made does not make that choice an accident. The real question to focus on is, "Did we do it on purpose?"

Talk about the expected/appropriate behavior. The word "sin" in Scripture comes from an ancient archery term that means, "missing the mark." To speak about sin in ways that are helpful we need to understand what the goal is. Help your child understand that God has a dream – a plan for his or her life – and the way to be truly happy is to follow God's plan. Make sure rules are phrased in terms of what to do, not just what not to do. For example, we might speak about using an inside voice in the house instead of simply saying, "Don't

yell.” When admonishing your child about wrong that was done, compare what is expected with what the child actually did.

Express confidence that your child is capable of doing the right thing. As Catholics, we believe that we are created by God to be good – made to love him and one another. Because of this, we can tell our children with confidence that deep down we know they are good people. But we must act on the goodness God places inside of us. Talk about God’s grace, which helps us to do what is right. Let your children know that God wants to help them do good things. Remind them to ask him for help.

Provide a way to help repair the damage that was done. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we call this “penance,” but we can practice this as a family as well. For example, a child who has been unkind to a sibling might be assigned to perform a special favor for him or her. This has the added value of making the consequence more logical and relevant to the situation, increasing the chance that your child will learn from it.