

# Virtues Companionship

## A Virtues Approach to Counseling Children

One of the most important ways to build character is to support a child's capacity to make moral choices. Companionship is a way parents can support children in discovering their own wisdom and using it to work through their feelings. A virtues approach to counseling helps a child to do their own spiritual work rather than doing it for them.

Parents often react to a child's concern by offering advice, giving a quick and easy fix to the problem. Parents will notice however, that children are not receptive to this kind of "preaching" which often leaves them feeling ashamed of the feelings they are experiencing. It is much more useful for children to apply their own wisdom to find a solution to their feelings and make their own moral choices.

Virtues companionship is a way to witness what a child is feeling without acting on a need to fix it. It is not a time to bring in one's own feelings or to take on the child's. There is a big difference between sympathy, empathy and companionship. Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone; while empathy is when you can feel his or her feelings. The key to companionship is bringing compassion and detachment so that you can walk along with others without taking on the responsibility of their feelings.

There are seven facets that sometimes serve as steps in the process of spiritual companionship.

1. Open the door. The magic questions you can ask are what or how. For example you can ask a child "What happened?" and "How did that make you feel?" encouraging children to talk about their experience. Avoid questions that begin with who, where, and why as they will set you up to judge the situation,

rather than to support what the child is feeling.

2. Offer Receptive Silence. Do not rush in to offer your own anecdotes, solutions or advice. Simply remain open to the things that your child wants to talk about. Receptive silence is a respectful way to give others the space in which to speak fully, giving the whole story without interruption.

3. Ask cup-emptying questions. Again, use open ended questions that begin with what, how and when and listen to the responses in a non-judgmental



way that expresses your curiosity about the situation. Good cup-emptying questions can be general such as "How did that make you feel?" or they can be more specific to what a person has just expressed.

4. Focus on sensory cues. If something arises that involves the senses in some way try to zero in on it. For example if a child is describing a terrible nightmare that they have just had about a giant monster with pointy teeth, you can ask "What were those teeth like?" This will open the door so that the child can release and discharge her fear.

5. Ask virtues reflection questions.

When it seems like your child has finished emptying her cup, always give a little extra time in silence to think and make sure there is nothing else to say. The truth in a situation can often be found right at the bottom of the cup. Your goal at this point is to help her to decide how she is going to act in response to her feelings. You might say "It takes a lot of courage to deal with scary dreams. What can you do that will help you to sleep better?" Children will come up with very creative solutions when given a virtues based reference to guide them.

6. Ask closure questions. Closure questions are a way to weave the teachable moments of the experience into the total experience – combining thinking and feeling - the cohesion of head and heart. Use questions such as "What is clearer to you now?" or "what has been helpful about talking about this?"

7. Offer a virtues acknowledgement. Always end by acknowledging your child's use of the virtues, restoring a sense of dignity to the situation. For example "I see your courage. It is difficult to face your fears when you wake up from a bad dream." The most powerful virtues acknowledgements are very specific and relevant to the situation. When they ring true, they help to mend the soul.

Parents should never encourage children to skip their feelings; they should allow children to experience feelings and to deal with them. After all, every child has the right to be seen, to be heard and to be taken seriously.

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More information about Virtues Companionship can be found in "The Family Virtues Guide" by Linda Kavelin Popov