

Raising Courageous Kids Reading Group Guide for Parents

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*Courage is the first of human qualities because it is
the quality which guarantees all the other things.*

Winston Churchill

Introduction



The introduction, discussion questions, suggested reading list, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Charles A. Smith's *Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism*. Additional guides are available for teachers, professionals, and other groups from the author's website at www.raisingcourageouskids.com.

This document is likely to be updated so check the version date at the bottom of the page.

*Each participant in the reading group should have read *Raising Courageous Kids*. This guide is intended for informal use, possibly by one or more of the parents in the group. The discussion may occur at one session or over a series of meetings. In all cases, the discussion leader can choose which questions to emphasize for his or her group. Leaders are also encouraged to form their own questions that relate to the book.*

For discussion

1. Is the world a more dangerous place than when you were growing up? If so, can you describe the difference? How do we prepare our children to live in a dangerous world?
2. The author found that when he asked elementary children to describe what they thought courage means, the first response he always heard emphasized that courage meant not being afraid. Why do you think children have this point of view? How would you respond to them? How do you define *courage*?
3. Why is fear a valuable emotion? What function does it serve? How does fear contribute to courage?
4. Is courage innate or learned? Are courageous people born that way or is this something they learned?

5. In “Children: Our Heart Work,” the first chapter of *Raising Courageous Kids*, the author suggests four reasons that courage is a fundamental capacity. Do you agree with the reasons he gave and can you suggest any additional basis for the importance of courage?

This section originated in a discussion I had with a parent participating in a workshop on courage in San Antonio, Texas. Although she agreed that nurturing courage in children is important, she found the idea and its implications frightening. “You need to convince your reader that reading through the book is worth working through the fear about this issue,” she told me. Most of the first chapter is my effort to respond to her challenge.

6. The author suggests that courage is primarily a learned response that evolves over a series of eight steps that begin at infancy. At each step, children learn a skill that is fundamental to the development of courage. In the first chapter he emphasizes that these “steps” are more like movement in a dance instead of walking up stair steps. Does this kind of evolution make sense to you? Why would he want to emphasize this movement as more like a dance?
7. What do you think most parents think of the idea of *willpower* in children? Is willpower considered good or bad? How does a child develop willpower while learning to respond to parents’ rules and expectations? What is the difference between willpower and *defiance*? What is the risk for a child who fails to develop a healthy degree of willpower?
8. The author suggests seven parent practices that nurture willpower. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote willpower in their children? How can parents undermine its development?
9. Can you envision something that is worth your child fighting for? Is it possible to teach a child to solve problems nonviolently while allowing for the possibility that in rare cases when physical intervention, and possibly fighting, may be necessary? At these moments, adults may be unavailable for help, successful flight may be impossible, and the adversary may not listen to reason.

Taking this position is unusual for a professional. It worries me because of how easy it can be misinterpreted. I believe strongly that we should emphasize nonviolence among all ages of children. I also believe, though, that there may come a time when a physical defense is necessary. Young children, of course, struggle to understand this distinction. Beginning in grade school, though, I think we can help our children understand when to and when not to use physical force.

10. What is the relationship between caring and courage? What implication does caring have for heroism?
11. Do you want your children learn to care about other people? What about strangers? Does the common emphasis on teaching children to be frightened of strangers contribute to the destructive effects of tribal altruism [p. 62]? What are the possible consequences of making children afraid of or indifferent to other people? What if most parents felt this way? What effect would this practice have on your community? Can children learn to be cautious while caring?
12. The author suggests five parent practices that nurture caring. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a

parent could do to promote caring in their children? How might parents undermine its development?

13. What is the relationship between vigilance and courage? Why is vigilance an important skill to learn? Does vigilance moderate recklessness?

A parent might be concerned that children who hear examples of heroic behavior could be motivated to take foolish risks. I think anyone who emphasizes the importance of courage for children should include a strong reference to vigilance. We should strive to help children learn to be “smart with their hearts.”

14. The author differentiates between *sudden* and *persistent* danger. Can you describe sudden or persistent dangers you faced sometime in the past? These fears can also be either rational or irrational. Vigilance means detecting and making a reasonable evaluation of a danger. Were the fears you recall rational or irrational?
15. The author suggests seven parent practices that nurture vigilance. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote vigilance in their children? How might parents undermine its development?
16. How does “emotional highjacking” affect how we respond to sudden or persistent danger?
17. What does “composure” mean for children and how does it have an effect on the development of courage? At what age does the author suggest that children begin to learn composure?
18. Can you recall a time when you faced the emotional turbulence of fear (e.g., when your child was seriously hurt)? How well did you face this task? Did you fall apart or rise above fear to respond?
19. The author suggests six parent practices that nurture composure. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote composure in their children? How might parents undermine its development?
20. The author emphasizes that empathy consists of both compassion and insight. How are these two qualities different? What impact do they have on courage and the capacity for heroism?

How a parent reacts to his or her child’s suffering can be one of the most painful experiences in life. When my son broke his neck, ribs, and back in a motorcycle accident on a race track, the distress I felt was horrible. When he came home for a long and painful recovery, I would have gladly taken the pain from him to myself if I could have. After a courageous effort on his part, he made a full recovery.

21. What does the author mean by “attunement”? Can parents provide examples of this form of emotional harmony?
22. If they feel very sad, should parents cry in front of their children? Why might this contribute to empathy? What should a parent do to ensure that showing tears is a positive experience for children?

23. The author suggests five parent practices that nurture empathy. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote empathy in their children? How might parents undermine its development?
24. What is the relationship between integrity and courage? How does the author's distinction between internal and external locus of control have an effect on integrity? Can you identify an example of what a child might do to demonstrate each of these two views of responsibility?
25. When does integrity originate? Describe examples to show the roots of integrity. What might you see during preschool or elementary school to conclude a child is gradually developing integrity.
26. Did you ever meet someone with integrity? What did they do or reveal to give you that impression? Do you want your children to be like this person?
27. The author suggests five parent practices that nurture integrity. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote integrity in their children? How might parents undermine its development?
28. How does the example of five members of the Danville High School girl's basketball team illustrate honor? Did it take courage for them to do what they did? Was the action worth the consequences?
29. Honor is a pretty fancy word to describe something children can do. What does honor mean? At what age do you think children may first begin to show honor? Is the development of this skill associated with children's sense of "fairness"?
30. What is the difference between accountability and blame? Can a person be held accountable for some situation without being blamed for the consequences?
31. What is the difference between shame and guilt? When are shame and guilt good and when are they bad? What implications do they have for courage and the capacity for heroism?
32. The author suggests five parent practices that nurture honor. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote honor in their children? How might parents undermine its development?
33. According to the author, valor is the integration of the previous seven steps and is both the most difficult and dependent on opportunity. What does *valor* mean?

■ *Valor elevates the strengths achieved during the previous seven steps.*
34. *The Ring of Valor* consists of a sequence of seven events, starting with *opportunity* and *notice* and ending with taking *action*. Examine any of the *Mighty Heart* stories and show how this sequence was revealed in the actions of the young person.

■ *The Ring of Valor serves as the basis for the "Challenge to Valor" card game created by the author. See www.raisingcourageouskids.com and click on "Game" for more information.*

35. The author suggests six parent practices that nurture valor. Which of these practices do you think is the most important? Can you think of something else a parent could do to promote valor in their children? How might parents undermine its development?

For further reading

Kathleen Brehony, *Ordinary Grace: An Examination of the Roots of Compassion, Altruism, and Empathy, and the Ordinary Individuals Who Help Others in Extraordinary Ways* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999).

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

John McCain, *Why Courage Matters: The Way to a Braver Life* (New York: Random House, 2004).

Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Charles A. Smith, *From Wonder to Wisdom: Using Stories to Help Children Grow* (New York: New American Library, 1989).

Charles A. Smith, *The Peaceful Classroom: 162 Easy Activities to Teach Preschoolers Compassion and Cooperation* (Mt. Rainier, MD: Gryphon House, 1993).

Author background

Charles A. Smith is a professor and extension specialist in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University. He is a former play therapist, medical social worker, preschool teacher, and child development center director. He is married and the father of two children. He began working on *Raising Courageous Kids* the day after the 9-11 tragedy to call attention to the heroism that day and better understand its origins and implications for children. *Raising Courageous Kids* is his fifth book, following *The Encyclopedia of parenting* (Greenwood Press), *The peaceful classroom: 162 easy activities to teach preschoolers compassion and cooperation* (Gryphon House), *From wonder to wisdom: Using stories to help children grow* (NAL/Penguin), and *Promoting the social development of young children* (Mayfield).