

The Longest Runway

By Dane L. Peters

Models have 45 seconds to present the latest fashions to people sitting on either side of the 60-foot runway they walk. With spotlights illuminating every inch of the way, each model's gait, poses, and gestures help entice retailers to buy. There is another much longer runway—a runway that parents use to model for their children. Instead of displaying fashions, parents present habits, opinions, actions, and life skills for children's viewing. Dr. Montessori helps us understand how important modeling is through mixed-age groups and the directress-teacher model. The actions of adults who raise and educate children are received, measured, evaluated, and assimilated by children from birth. Do either of these two scenarios sound familiar?

"Benny, not now, honey. I know I promised you that we would play a game, but I have to email Auntie Laurie about the wedding." Or, "Hey, sport, go play with the other kids while I check the football scores and my mail... then I'll join you."

Parents are addicted to their electronic devices. Anytime, anywhere—texting, emailing, checking a stock quote or the latest news headline. This is one example of how we are on a runway of life, modeling for our children how to shape their own lives. Even though we know children are watching or mirroring our behaviors, we invariably persist by rationalizing that this must get done now.

Recently, I had the good fortune to say a few words at my son's wedding. How could I make the best use of that runway, with so many important people there? Longtime teacher that I am, I wanted to share something from my life experience that might stick with him, his wife, and those watching this beautiful union. I said something like this: "You will face challenges throughout your marriage, often when you least expect them, and you will find yourself on a stage without knowing it. This is especially true when children enter the picture. To help deal with these challenges, I give you the three Hs.

The first H is Helpful. Be helpful to each other and those around you, particularly those less fortunate. Many years ago, I had dinner with the author Sol Gordon, who told me about the Hebrew word *mitzvah*, which means 'a good deed.' He said doing a *mitzvah* was the best way to overcome anxiety or depression. Always stand ready to 'pay it forward' and lend a helpful hand,

and know that children love to watch people performing good deeds.

The second H is Humility. Author and psychologist Mary Pipher interviewed a man who was married to the same woman for over 53 years. She asked him to what he could attribute to his long-lasting marriage. He quickly replied, "When I get up each morning and go into the bathroom, I look into the mirror and say, *You aren't so hot either.*" Children need to see adults modeling humility.

The third H is Humor. Never be afraid to model humor and use it regularly." (As if on cue, my 2- and 3-year-old granddaughters chose that moment to run up to me and grab my leg. Everyone laughed aloud. "See, humor is good," I responded.)

How you model yourself on the runway of life invariably touches those who are watching you—children and adults. The runway exists for CEOs as they model best practices for their employees; teachers as they guide students in their lessons; and parents as they live their lives in front of their children, often oblivious to the impressions and consequences.



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Suggested Reading

Another Country, by Mary Pipher (1999)
The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract, by Ted and Nancy Sizer (1999)
The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age, by Catherine Steiner-Adair (2013)