

Teaching gentleness in a violent world

In a world where violence and cruelty seem to be common and almost acceptable, a lot of parents wonder what they can do to help their children become 'kinder and gentler'--to develop a sense of caring and compassion for others. Raising kids who care isn't a solution to violence by itself, but you might worry that being exposed to a lot of violence -- whether it's on television or on the streets -- could make your children 'hard' and uncaring.

Parents, of course, can't completely control all of the things that affect their children's lives -- after all, children spend a lot of time out in the 'real world' which can often be harsh, uncaring, or just plain unhappy -- and children have their own personalities and characteristics that parents can't change or control. But there are some things that a parent can try to help encourage their children to become caring, just and responsible.

Are Children 'Naturally' Caring?

People sometimes think that children don't really 'see' the outside world -- or other people -- the way adults do, that they view the world from their own eyes and in their own way. But is this true?

Researchers used to believe that a sense of real caring about others came as people grow into adulthood. But now studies are finding that children can show signs of empathy and concern from a very early age.

For example, a study by psychologists Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, Ph.D., Marian Radke-Yarrow, Ph.D., and Robert King, Ph.D. observed children whose parents were hurt somehow -- either physically (e.g. father having a bad headache) or emotionally (e.g. mother received bad news and was crying). They discovered that even very young children had a pretty well-developed sense of empathy.

They reacted with concern, wanting to help or 'fix' the problem, and they offered comfort and compassion to the parent who was hurt.

For instance, one mother had an argument with her husband and began crying. Her daughter, who was 21 months old, came and sat on her lap and became very physically affectionate: 'Then she leaned over, and kissed me on the forehead. And that just cleared up all the depression, and I reached over and hugged her. And then she began to smile, and she looked relieved.'

It isn't just young children who have these kinds of reactions. And it isn't just for their parents that they have these feelings. A few years ago, a twelve-year-old Philadelphia boy opened his own shelter for homeless people. Many studies have shown that children respond quickly and with concern to a classmate, friend, family neighbor, or to a stranger, who is being hurt. It's well known, too, that children have a natural affinity for animals and a desire to help them.

One study, by Ziporah Magen, Ph.D., and Rachel Aharoni, Ph.D. found that teenagers who were involved in helping others felt very positive about their lives and had high hopes for their own futures. 'It was a wonderful feeling,' reported one student in this study. 'My feeling as free as a sparrow made me feel glad and happy and that life is an exciting thing.'

What Can Parents Do?

Let them Know How You Feel

The most important thing you can do is to let your children know how much it means to you that they behave with kindness and responsibility. When you catch your child doing something that you think is thoughtless or cruel, you should let them know right away that you don't want them doing that. Speak to your child firmly and honestly, and keep your focus on the act, not on the child personally: something along the lines of 'What you did is not very nice' rather than, 'YOU are not very nice!'

It's important to let your children know how deeply you feel about their behavior toward others. If they see that you have a real emotional commitment to something, it's more likely that the issue will become important to them, too. This emotional reaction needs to be accompanied by information: some explanation of why you disapprove ; for example, 'Look, Joey is crying. He's crying because you took his toy away. That wasn't a very nice thing to do!' or 'It hurts the cat when you do that; that's why he scratched you. It isn't kind, and I don't want you to do that anymore!'

Be frank, honest and upfront with your kids about what kind of behavior you do and don't like. Also, keep it short and to the point; the idea is to teach them, not to make them feel guilty!

Role Modeling

According to a study by psychologists E. Gil Clary, Ph.D. and Jude Miller, Ph.D., there are two kinds of parental role modeling that help teach children to be caring: kindness to others, and kindness to the child.

In other words, actions speak louder than words.

If you are consistently caring and compassionate, it's more likely that your children will be too. Children watch their parents, and other adults, for clues on how to behave. Keep in mind that if you say one thing and do another, your children will pay a lot more attention to what you do. The old warning 'Do as I say, not as I do' simply does not work, particularly when it comes to teaching about caring.

Not everyone has time to devote to volunteer work or money to donate to causes, but there are small acts of caring that can be part of your family's life. These acts of caring don't have to be grandiose. Doing a favor for a neighbor, taking a stray animal to a shelter, giving money and a kind word to a homeless person, helping out when a group of teenagers are cruelly teasing a classmate; there are all kinds of small acts of compassion that you can watch your children do, and even take part in themselves.

Try to surround your children with other people who are kind and caring, so that they have several role models.

Another thing you can do is try to find organized ways for your children to get involved. Let them know about places in the community where they can volunteer, and encourage them to join. Many volunteer organizations and churches have special programs for young people and even for children.

You and Your Child

If you treat your children with respect for their dignity, with concern and with regard for their achievements -- you help them understand that all living creatures should be treated with dignity and concern.

One part of this is to reward your children for acts of kindness. Psychologist Julius Segal, Ph.D., points out that just as it's important to let them know how strongly you feel about their unkind acts, it's important to let them know how highly you regard their kind ones. For instance: 'I saw you take care of the boy who fell on the playground. That was very kind of you, and it makes me feel very proud.'

What About Effects of the Outside World

Parents understandably worry that their effort at home can be undermined by outside influences, such as their children's friends, daily violence in their own neighborhoods, television shows and movies, or a culture that exalts 'heroes' who are selfish.

There are a few things that you can do to help counteract these influences, for instance:

- * Give them books that promote compassionate behavior. Keep in mind, though, that kids -- especially teenagers -- don't like characters who are 'goody-two-shoes,' so look for books about 'ordinary' characters who perform acts of caring and concern.
- * A study at the National Institute of Mental Health found that children who see kindness on television tend to imitate it. For this reason, you may want to limit their viewing of violent programs and encourage them to watch shows that promote ideas about caring and helping.
- * Find out about the movies your children want to see: are they excessively violent, do they glamorize criminals or people who 'get ahead' at the expense of others, do they glorify violence to people or animals? While you can't shield your children from everything, a little discussion can go a long way. Ask them to think about what they saw and to consider other approaches the characters might have taken.
- * Educate your children about famous altruists. Local museums can provide an inexpensive and enjoyable way to do this, as can television specials and books. Talk to them who they admire, and why.

Can Children Become Too Sensitive?

If your child is confronted with the harsher realities of life everyday, you might wonder whether it's a good idea to let them see even more suffering and distress. Other parents might worry that exposing kids to a harder side of life that they've never seen could traumatize the children.

These are understandable fears, and according to some experts, there are cases when children can become sensitive to the suffering of others. This is particularly true of children who are already emotionally fragile.

Not all giving is healthy for the giver; if a child starts placing the needs of other above his own, this could be a sign that perhaps he or she is giving too much.

Parents helping children care

Several schools have adopted 'caring courses' for children, taking students to nursing homes and to help the disabled, and many humane societies have instituted children's 'compassion clubs'. You can also see numbers of children at political rallies and marches for various causes. Generally speaking, children who participate in these activities have not been traumatized; for the most part, they have adopted compassion and caring into their everyday lives and feel very rewarded by the experience. You as the parent can best judge when your child seems overly distressed.

The Indestructible Link

In the words of Dr. Julius Segal, 'none of the approaches suggested here will work in the absence of an indestructible link of caring between parent and child.'

What most inspires a child to grow up caring about others is the caring that the child receives. Experts point out that when children feel a more secure base at home, they're more likely to venture out and pay attention to others; it's when they feel deprived of love and nurturing that they focus on themselves and their own needs. Furthermore, that nurturing is itself a perfect role model for children.