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Raising Kind Kids: 8 Things Parents and Teachers Can Do

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For more than four decades, my work as a developmental psychologist has focused on helping parents and teachers foster good character in kids. These days, when I speak to parents, I always begin with a story about a time I spoke at an independent school and the next morning the school secretary came up to me looking very troubled. “I spent a very guilty night after your talk,” she said. “I have three sons. The first two are hard-working and responsible. The third says he’s a hedonist. He’s 26 and says his sole purpose in life is to have a good time. Where did I go wrong?”

After a lighthearted reassurance that “two out of three isn’t bad,” I reminded her that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between our efforts as parents and how our kids turn out. We don’t create the person our child becomes. That is influenced by a host of factors, including their genes and innate temperament; the company they keep; their teachers, coaches, schools and colleges; their experiences and how they interpret them; the presence or absence of a spiritual support system in their lives; and the popular culture, social media and myriad other influences they take into their minds, hearts and souls.

To a large degree, throughout their life’s journey our children create their character by the choices they make. Fourteen-year-old Anne Frank, before the Gestapo captured her family, put it this way in her diary: “Parents can give good advice and put their children on the right path, but the final forming of a person’s character lies in their own hands.”

That said, our job as parents is to do our best and make the most of the countless opportunities we have to contribute to our children’s growth in goodness.

Individual Differences in Early Empathy and Altruism

Children's moral personalities begin to be evident very early in life. We can do a better job of supporting their strengths and helping them with areas for improvement if we pay attention to their emerging characters.

Consider a fascinating study that revealed marked individual differences in how young children respond to the distress of others. Carolyn Zahn-Waxler and Marian Radke-Yarrow trained mothers to observe and report all situations in which their young children encountered someone who was experiencing distressing feelings such as anger, sorrow or pain. Children as young as 1 1/2 to 2 years of age were remarkably consistent in how they reacted to others' distress. Some were intensely emotional and compassionate; some were intellectual and analytical; some avoided and were unable to tolerate emotion in others; and some were detached and unresponsive.

For two-thirds of the children, these distinctive patterns of reacting were still evident when they were 7. A child who at 17 months physically comforted a crying baby, at the age of 7 years spontaneously gave her sandals to a younger friend to protect her feet from burning as they walked on a hot sidewalk. A child who, at age 2, had pushed away another child to protect a friend, at the age of 7 confronted an adult who had pushed ahead of his grandmother in the grocery line. An 18-month-old who ran away or plugged her ears in response to crying or anger complained, at the age of 7, that she just could not take much more of someone's crying.

Indications that a young child does *not* react sympathetically to others' distress, these researchers concluded, should be a signal for parents and teachers to make extra efforts to train a sense of concern for others.

What Works in Fostering Good Character?

Parenting is an art, not a science. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from a half-century's research on parenting and character development. In their article, "Fostering Goodness,"

psychologists Marvin Berkowitz and John Grych analyzed 76 childrearing studies carried out in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. They were able to identify five parenting practices that were positively related to moral character outcomes such as children’s empathy, altruism, moral reasoning and self-control. They called these standout parenting practices “the fabulous five”:

1. *Demandingness*—setting high and clear expectations and holding kids accountable.
2. *Nurturance*—providing warmth, support and care that meets the needs of the child.
3. *Empowerment*—giving children a voice in family life and decisions that affect them.
4. *Reasoning*—helping children understand how their actions affect others.
5. *Modeling*— acting in the moral ways we want our children to act.

Not long after Berkowitz and Grych identified their fabulous five, the researcher Kathryn Wentzel independently posed an intriguing question: “Are effective teachers like good parents?” She investigated the relationship between teaching styles and student outcomes in young adolescents. She found that teachers who 1) have high expectations for their students, 2) set clear rules, 3) are nurturing, 4) use democratic communication, and 5) are seen by students as being fair—all practices that parallel the fabulous five parenting practices—are more likely than teachers without these qualities to have students who show positive outcomes such as prosocial behavior and good grades. Conclusion? Good teachers are in fact like good parents. What works in families works in schools.

Let’s look at eight concrete ways to apply the fabulous five (often used in combination).

1. Practice what you preach, and preach what you practice.

Cultivating kindness in children begins with modeling it in

word and deed. Children learn the meaning of kindness by the treatment they receive. But kids don't always pick up on our good example. Modeling becomes more powerful when it's coupled with direct teaching.

A study that supports the wisdom of combining good example and direct teaching is Samuel and Pearl Oliner's *The Altruistic Personality*. The Oliners interviewed persons who rescued Jews from the Holocaust and people who had lived in the same parts of Nazi-occupied Europe but did not get involved in rescue. Rescuers were much more likely to say that their parents both modeled and taught good values. Rescuers' parents were much more likely to explicitly teach an attitude of tolerance toward other cultures and religions. One man said: "My father taught me to love my neighbor, regardless of their race or religion." A woman cited her mother's teaching: "My mother always said to remember to do some good for someone at least once a day."

2. Create an intentional family culture of kindness and respect.

Culture shapes character. If we want to raise children who are respectful and kind, we need to create an intentional family culture that prioritizes those virtues and makes them salient in everyday family life. One way to do that is to use the language of kindness and respect:

"Would you be kind enough to help your sister pick up the family room?"

"Thank you for your kindness."

"What would be a more respectful way to say that?"

"How can you settle this in a kind and respectful way?"

A family mission statement is potentially a powerful culture-shaping tool. Successful schools, businesses, and nonprofits typically have mission statements that identify their core values and create a common culture. In the same way, a family (or classroom) mission statement will help you name the values you want to live by and establish them as shared expectations. Sit

down together and ask, “What kind of a family do we want to be?” Get kids’ input so they feel ownership. Below is the mission statement of a family with four children ages 10, 8, 6 and 5. It hangs in the kitchen where they can review it at the start of the week and refer to it when needed:

The Davidson Way

We try hard to be kind, honest and fair.

We don’t lie, cheat, steal or intentionally hurt others.

We don’t whine, complain or make excuses.

When we make a mistake, we learn from it and make up for it.

We commit to growing in our faith and trust in God’s goodness.

We live with an attitude of gratitude.

If your family mission statement becomes a continuing point of reference, it will create a shared sense of purpose and identity: “This is how we live; this is who we are.” A weekly family meeting helps to hold everyone accountable: “How did we use kind words this week? How can we avoid saying unkind things even if we’re upset with somebody?” Teachers find that a weekly class meeting serves the same purpose: holding everybody accountable to the agreed-upon rules and addressing the inevitable problems that arise from living and working together.

3. Correct hurtful actions—clearly and with feeling.

The study of young children’s responses to others’ distress found that mothers of compassionate children had two notable characteristics. They were warm and nurturing, and when their own child did something that was hurtful, they took it seriously. For example, a 2-year-old girl who comforted a crying child on the playground had, in the past, once pulled another little girl’s hair. When she did that, her mother had responded:

“You *hurt* Amy!” (pointing out the effect on the other child)

“Pulling hair hurts!” (an instructive generalization)

“NEVER pull hair!” (a small moral absolute).

By her clear teaching, expressed with obvious feeling, this mother sent a strong message: Hurting is a big deal. As a result, her daughter was more likely to take it seriously and respond compassionately when she later saw another child crying on the playground. By contrast, the children who did *not* respond compassionately to others’ distress had mothers who had reacted more casually when their child had done something hurtful (“Now that’s not nice, don’t do that”).

Character education must train the heart as well as the mind. We want a child not just to *know* that something is wrong but also to *feel* that it is wrong. Bland parental or teacher responses to hurtful behavior won’t produce an active conscience in a child.

4. Require restitution.

We don’t want correction to end with a child feeling bad. Kids should learn that when they do something wrong, they can do something right to make up for it. Apologizing is the first thing they should do; the second thing is to ask, “What can I do to make up for it?” Restitution is apologizing through action.

If kids forget to ask what they can do to make amends, we can remind them. Then we can suggest an appropriate restitution. For example: “You can make up for not being nice to your brother by reading him a story while I’m getting the dinner on.” Once kids have had some practice making restitution, we can shift more of the responsibility to them: “What do *you* think you can do to make things right?” Whenever possible, restitution should include teaching empathy (e.g., “You hurt your sister’s feelings—what can you do to make her feel better?”). Used in the classroom, restitution (sometimes called “restorative justice”) has been found to reduce discipline problems and increase students’ willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

5. Give kids real responsibilities.

Responsibility—in the literal sense of “response-ability”—has everything to do with kindness. Kindness means caring about others; if you’re doing that, you’ll make an effort to be helpful.

In a CNN and *Time* magazine poll, two-thirds of parents said they feel they've spoiled their children. If adults are doing all the giving in family life and kids all the taking, that's a recipe for producing entitled kids like the 15-year-old boy who, when asked to mow the lawn, said, "Why should I mow the lawn? It's not my lawn."

The best antidote for that kind of self-centeredness is for children to have meaningful responsibilities in their family from the earliest years. Research finds that when children have regular chores, they develop a greater concern for others. We shouldn't pay them for chores; doing so robs them of the opportunity to be contributing family members and to develop the habit of being helpful. An allowance can be given independently as one of the benefits, like food and shelter, of being part of a family.

Kids also need the experience of extending kindness beyond the family. If you can, do community service with your child. At all developmental levels, schools have found service learning to be one of the most powerful character education strategies. Among the benefits: it increases self-esteem, kindness toward others, and respect for differences.

6. Get control of screens.

Values are transmitted and character formed to a large degree through human interactions, especially face-to-face conversations. But screens have come to dominate family life; our children spend vastly more time interacting with them than they do with us. To the extent that screens displace meaningful conversation with our kids, they deplete the moral soil in which character grows. To increase good conversation in the home, I encourage parents to take advantage of Harvard's Family Dinner Project. Its website provides online dinner recipes and dozens of conversation starters, like "What makes you feel loved?" "What do you wish we did more as a family?" "What are three things you can do to make other people happy?"

Too much screen time also produces irritable brains and problem behavior. Many parents who have tried the "electronic

fast” recommended by psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley in her book *Reset Your Child’s Brain* have reported improvements, sometimes dramatic, in their kids’ sleep, mood, manners, listening and overall behavior. Says one mother: “My 3-year-old went from three to five meltdowns a day to one or less and from aggression toward his 1-year-old brother to playing with him gently. My 7-year-old no longer constantly complains about being bored but plays creatively with his toys and enjoys drawing.”

Arguably most worrisome is the fact that screens connect kids with a universe of information, images and influences, some of them highly toxic. In the United States and United Kingdom, the average age at which boys begin to access internet pornography is now 11. In October 2015, the American College of Pediatrics issued “The Impact of Pornography on Children,” reporting that youth consumption of pornography is linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, violent behavior, early sexual debut, sexual promiscuity and higher rates of teen pregnancy. Children who have viewed pornography are more likely to sexually assault other children. The more teens watch porn, the more likely they are to agree with statements such as, “It’s acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex.”

If you have an elementary-school-aged child, I recommend the picture book, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today’s Young Kids* by Kristen Jenson and Dr. Gail Poyner. The authors acknowledge that good parents want to protect their kids’ innocence, but they point out a sad reality: “Children all over the world begin viewing hard-core Internet pornography long before their parents even consider discussing its dangers.”

Schools for their part should take precautions against the dangers present in their environment. In a 2017 blog post written for her organization Protect Young Minds, Jenson lists these: (1) Smartphones, which kids can use to share XXX videos on the bus or playground; (2) School computers, since even innocent searches for images can bring up pornography; (3) Library databases that can link kids to pornographic books; (4) Slang

terms that can spark curiosity and lead to online searches and pornography; and (5) Sexualized conversations or behaviors acted out by children who have viewed pornography or have been sexually abused.

7. Build the courage to be kind.

Kindness, like every other virtue, doesn't stand alone. It needs a supporting cast. In many situations, it takes courage to be kind.

Bullying remains a serious problem in schools. In the past, research has found that about 90 percent of students who witnessed school bullying did nothing to help. Schools can take deliberate steps to create a peer culture where the expectation is, "We have each other's back." "Whatever hurts my brother, hurts me" is the motto of one independent boys' school in our Center's study of award-winning secondary schools. Steps to Respect, a lower school bullying prevention program, teaches kids how to resist peer pressure to mistreat others and has significantly increased the likelihood that students will do something (speak up, get an adult, report it anonymously) to try to stop bullying when they see it.

In their research study *Youth Voice Project*, Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon found that kids who are targets of peer cruelty have been helped by what they call "peer allies." Bullied students say that peers who provide companionship and emotional support are of even more help than those who directly confront the bullies. When bullying victims are asked, "What did your peers do that helped you most?" they say things like, "They listened to what I had to say and encouraged me that the people who were treating me that way were being immature" and "They were always at my side to make sure I was OK." Bullying victims who get this kind of support from compassionate peers are less likely, studies show, to suffer the debilitating anxiety and depression that many kids experience as a result of being bullied. In the view of the *Youth Voice Project*, these peer allies are "quiet heroes."

8. Read books that cultivate kindness.

With all kids and especially with kids for whom kindness doesn't

come naturally, good books can be one of our best allies. There are scores of books, fiction and nonfiction, with strong character themes. The more kids read them—with us or on their own—the more they'll be immersed in goodness and attracted to it.

Pause during a read-aloud to ask when you and your child may have shown the virtue exhibited by someone in the story—or perhaps neglected to do so. Children's books that depict peer cruelty and exclusion and everyone's need for friendship—such as *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes and R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* and *We're All Wonders*—facilitate this kind of parent-child sharing of experiences.

Check out the online resource Brightly's "5 Books That Teach Kids What It Means to Be a Kind Person" and "Children's Books That Show Kids the Goodness in the World." Books that show the many inspiring ways people do good for others give us an opening for talking with our kids about how we each can make a positive difference in the world, especially through kindness.

References

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