

Raising a Caring and Compassionate Child

Like many things, kindness is a quality that children learn over time and through practice. Thankfully, there are many things you can do to encourage your child to be a kinder, gentler person. Research has found that the desire to help and comfort comes just as naturally to humans as being self-centered or hurtful.

How Empathy Grows

Empathy — the ability to understand another person's feelings — develops over time. A 2 year old may try to comfort a crying playmate by offering her own pacifier or blankie. While she is not able to understand why her friend is crying, she remembers times when she felt sad and knows what comforts her. At 3, children are more aware of others, but they still have trouble relating to how others actually feel. They may delight, for example, in knocking down someone else's block tower and not understand why the child who built it is so upset.

By age 4, children can better understand when they've hurt someone and can sometimes offer an apology without being told. They are also quite empathic about another child's injuries.

By the time children are 5 or 6, they often can share more easily and take turns. And they are able to discuss what it means to be kind and can brainstorm ideas for how they might help people.

The following suggestions will help you to teach your child about being goodhearted and compassionate. But in the words of author/psychologist Dr. Julius Segal, nothing "will work in the absence of an indestructible link of caring between parent and child." When you kiss your daughter's boo-boos or read cozy bedtime stories to your son, you are giving your children the base that enables them to reach out to others.

1. Believe that your children are capable of being kind.
2. Model positive action.
3. Treat children with respect.
4. Coach your child to pay attention to people's facial expressions.

5. Let your children know often that how they treat others matters to you greatly.
6. Don't let rudeness pass.
7. Acknowledge kindness.
8. Understand that your child's perception of differences in others comes into play.
9. Be sensitive to messages that your child picks up from the media.
10. Explain that calling someone names or excluding him from play can be as hurtful as hitting.
11. Avoid setting up competition within your family.
12. Show children how to help people in need.
13. Be patient with your little ones, because kindness and compassion are learned and life presents challenging situations even to adults.



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