

Kindness Booklet

“Fostering Children’s Compassion and Empathy”

Prepared by Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, Ph.D.
University of British Columbia
(kimberly.schonert-reichl@ubc.ca)

Ten Things Parents and Caregivers Can Do to Promote Emotional Understanding and Kindness in Young Children

1. **Ask your child how he or she is feeling.** When you ask about your child’s feelings, you are communicating that you care and value his or her emotions.
2. **Talk about your child’s feelings and the feelings of others that are communicated through facial and body expression.** When your child is sad or happy, you might say “I can tell how you are feeling because your face and body are telling me.” When a child’s friend or sibling is showing a feeling (such as sad), point out to your child that child’s feelings that are expressed through facial and body expressions, and discuss the experiences and situations that lead to the various types of emotions.
3. **Use a wide variety of emotion words in your interactions with young children.** When you are talking to your young child, use a number of different emotion words to talk about situations or events. Point out the emotions of others and use opportunities to expand your child’s emotional vocabulary, including words such as guilt, satisfied, pride, anxiety, fear, and excitement.
4. **Label emotions and describe the situations that lead to those emotions through children’s literature.** In early childhood, children are just beginning to develop their emotional literacy skills, which includes an emotional vocabulary. Use any opportunity to point out the emotions of others and give those emotions names. Children’s books provide a wonderful opportunity for this.
5. **Engage young children in activities that help you and others.** Like all of us, children want to help and contribute. Provide many opportunities for your child to help you (in household chores or other activities). Developing this early in development will help children see this as a normal part of life.
6. **Demonstrate caring and kindness through your own actions.** As we often know, children often can learn more from our actions than our words. Acknowledge your mistakes with your children (e.g., say “I am sorry”). Show forgiveness to others and your child.
7. **Talk about kindness and the good feelings that arise when doing kind things for others.** When your child is helping, tell him or her how good it feels. Communicate your own pride and happiness to your child for his or her helpful behavior.
8. **Promote gratitude.** Encourage your child to give thanks. Model gratitude and point out to your child all that he or she has to be thankful for in his or her life.

- 9. Use a positive and restorative approach to discipline and model empathy when your child has done something wrong.** When your child has done something wrong, use this as an opportunity for discussion, using a child-centered approach in which you take your child's perspective – that is, put yourself in his or her shoes and view the world from that point of view. Engage your child in problem solving – and discuss how he or she could do something different in the future that would end in a more positive way, you might say “What could we do if this happens again, what would be a way to solve this problem?” Also, help your child develop a restorative approach – that is, to find ways to repair harm when harm has been done. For example, if he or she has harmed another child intentionally or by accident, ask him or her what they could do to help the other child feel better.
- 10. Help your child develop a “caring” identity.** When your child is engaged activities that are caring and kind, you should recognize that behavior as part his or her identity – “you are such a kind and caring child because you did [the behavior that demonstrated kindness and caring.]”

Five Things Parents and Caregivers Can Do to Promote Empathy and Kindness in Middle Childhood and Adolescence

- 1. Develop your child or youth's prosocial value orientation – that is, “caring” identity – by engaging your child or youth in activities that benefit others.**
Recent research tells us that when you engage children and youth collectively in activities that benefit other human beings, you develop something that Ervin Staub calls a “prosocial value orientation” that is, an orientation that centers on helping and caring for others. Recent research also tells us that people who help others also report greater happiness and well-being in their lives.
- 2. Foster the development of moral purpose through promoting your child's or adolescent's engagement in activities that benefit the local and world community.** William Damon, professor and development psychologist at Stanford University, tells us that adolescence is particularly a critical time for youth to develop a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. They need opportunities to engage in activities that help them develop a sense of who they are in the world and how they can contribute to making the world better for all. Engage him or her in conversations about what matters and how he or she can make a difference. Facilitate the engagement of your child or youth in these local activities.
- 3. Model empathy, caring, and forgiveness.** As we often realize, our children and youth often learn more from what we do than what we say. Adolescents in particular are astute observers of how our actions are in or out of sync with our actions. Show caring and understanding in your interactions with your child and the others with whom you interact. Talk about the good feelings that come from helping others, and engage your child in opportunities to reflect about their own feelings and experiences about helping others. Acknowledge your mistakes with your children (e.g., say “I am sorry”). Show forgiveness to others and your child.
- 4. Don't pay your child for household chores.** Research by Joan Grusec and her colleagues shows that older children who are expected to do household work that benefits members of the family, and who are expected to do it on a routine or self-regulated basis, are more likely to show spontaneous concern for the welfare of others. Work that focuses attention on what is one's “own,” or is based on frequent requests for assistance, is clearly not positively related to the development of concern for others.
- 5. Encourage your child or adolescent to have a “gratitude” journal.**
Groundbreaking research in the area of positive psychology is showing us that people who take time in their daily lives to reflect on those things in their life for which they are grateful, gain many positive benefits – including greater happiness, optimism, and overall emotional and physical well-being. These individuals are also more likely to provide emotional support and help to others – suggesting that gratitude motivates individuals to do good.