

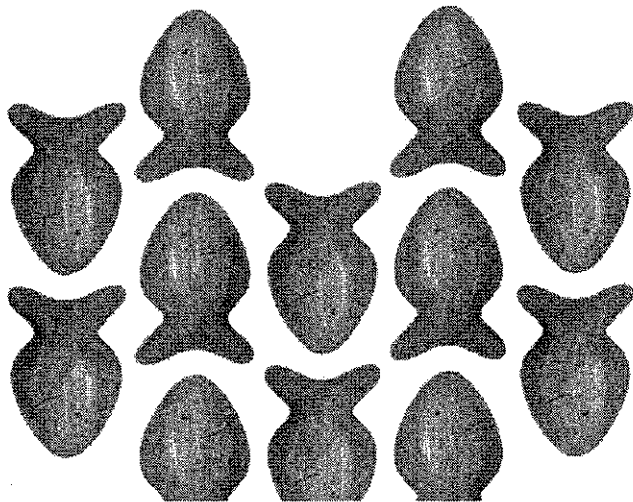
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## FAMILY

# Stop Trying to Raise Successful Kids

And start raising kind ones.

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DECEMBER 2019 ISSUE



Kids learn what's important to adults not by listening to what we say, but by noticing what gets our attention. And in many developed societies, parents now pay more attention to individual achievement and happiness than anything else. However much we praise kindness and caring, we're not actually showing our kids that we value these traits.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, then, that kindness appears to be in decline. A rigorous analysis of annual surveys of American college students showed a substantial drop from 1979 to 2009 in empathy and in imagining the perspectives of others. Over this period, students grew less likely to feel concern for people less fortunate than themselves—and less bothered by seeing others treated unfairly.

AS ANYONE who has been called out for hypocrisy by a small child knows, kids are exquisitely attuned to gaps between what grown-ups say and what grown-ups do. If you survey American parents about what they want for their kids, more than 90 percent say one of their top priorities is that their children be caring. This makes sense: Kindness and concern for others are held as moral virtues in nearly every society and every major religion. But when you ask *children* what their parents want for them, 81 percent say their parents value achievement and happiness over caring.

It's not just that people care less; they seem to be helping less, too. In one experiment, a sociologist scattered thousands of what appeared to be lost letters in dozens of American cities in 2001, and again in 2011. From the first round to the second one, the proportion of letters that was picked up by helpful passersby and put in a mailbox declined by 10 percent. (When the same experiment was conducted in Canada, helpfulness didn't diminish.) Psychologists find that kids born after 1995 are just as likely as their predecessors to believe that other people experiencing difficulty should be helped—but they feel less personal responsibility to take action themselves. For example, they are less likely to donate to charity, or even to express an interest in doing so.

If society is fractured today, if we truly care less about one another, some of the blame lies with

the values parents have elevated. In our own lives, we've observed many fellow parents becoming so focused on achievement that they fail to nurture kindness. They seem to regard their children's accolades as a personal badge of honor—and their children's failures as a negative reflection on their own parenting.

Other parents subtly discourage kindness, seeing it as a source of weakness in a fiercely competitive world. In some parenting circles, for example, there's a movement against intervening when preschoolers are selfish in their play. These parents worry that stepping in might prevent kids from learning to stick up for themselves, and say that they're less worried about the prospect of raising an adult who doesn't share than one who struggles to say no. But there's no reason parents can't teach their kids to care about others *and* themselves—to be both generous and self-

Kids, with their sensitive antennae, pick up on all this. They see their peers being celebrated primarily for the grades they get and the goals they score, not for the generosity they show. They see adults marking their achievements without paying as much attention to their character. Parents are supposed to leave a legacy for the next generation, but we are at risk of failing to pass down the key virtue of kindness. How can we do better?

**W**HEN OUR OWN KIDS started school, we noticed that many of our questions at the end of the day were about accomplishments. *Did your team win? How did the test go?*

To demonstrate that caring is a core value, we realized that we needed to give it comparable attention. We started by changing our questions.

respecting. If you encourage children to consider the needs and feelings of others, sometimes they will and sometimes they won't. But they'll soon learn the norm of reciprocity: If you don't treat others considerately, they may not be considerate toward you. And those *around* you will be less likely to be considerate of one another, too.

Parents' emphasis on toughness is partly an unintended consequence of the admirable desire to treat boys and girls more equally. Historically, families and schools encouraged girls to be kind and caring, and boys to be strong and ambitious. Today, parents and teachers are rightly investing more time and energy in nurturing confidence and leadership in girls. Unfortunately, there isn't the same momentum around developing generosity and helpfulness in boys. The result is less attention to caring across the board.

At our family dinners, we now ask our children what they did to help others. At first, "I forget" was the default reply. But after a while, they started giving more thoughtful answers. "I shared my snack with a friend who didn't have one," for example, or "I helped a classmate understand a question she got wrong on a quiz." They had begun actively looking for opportunities to be helpful, and acting upon them.

As parents, we've also tried to share our own experiences with helping—and to make a point of including the moments when we've failed. Telling your kids about how you regret not standing up for a child who was bullied might motivate them to step up one day. Recalling a time when you quit a team and left your teammates in the lurch might prompt your kids to think more carefully about their responsibilities to others.

The point is not to badger kids into kindness, or dangle carrots for caring, but to show that these qualities are noticed and valued. Children are naturally helpful—even the smallest ones appear to show an innate understanding of others' needs. By the time they are a year and a half old, many children are eager to help set the table, sweep the floor, and clean up games; by the time they turn two and a half, many will give up their own blanket for someone else who is cold.

But too many kids come to see kindness as a chore rather than a choice. We can change that. Experiments show that when kids are given the choice to share instead of being forced to, they're roughly twice as likely to be generous later. And when kids are praised and recognized for helping, they are more likely to help again.

with children who have compatible values—not ones who stomp all over them. We tell our own children that they shouldn't hang out with the popular kids who sneer and laugh when a classmate trips in the cafeteria. They should get to know the kids who help pick up her tray.

**A**S WE'VE SEEN, overemphasizing individual achievement may cause a deficit of caring. But we don't actually have to choose between the two. In fact, teaching children to care about others might be the best way to prepare them for a successful and fulfilling life.

Quite a bit of evidence suggests that children who help others end up achieving more than those who don't. Boys who are rated as helpful by their kindergarten teacher earn more money 30 years later. Middle-school students who help,

We can also advise our children to be mindful of the friends they make. Psychologists distinguish between two paths to popularity: status (which derives from being dominant and commanding attention) and likability (which comes from being friendly and kind). Adolescents are often drawn to status, flocking to cool kids who seem superior, even if they're not particularly nice. (Every parent can relate to the experience of thinking, *I can't believe that kid's behavior. He's never coming over again!*) Children are similarly quick to admire peers on the basis of their accomplishments—the fastest runner on the team, say, or the winner of the talent show. We don't think parents should police friendships, but we do think it's important to nudge kids to notice classmates who are kind and compassionate. We can ask how those children treat others, and how they make others feel. That's a starting point for developing friendships

cooperate, and share with their peers also excel—compared with unhelpful classmates, they get better grades and standardized-test scores. The eighth graders with the greatest academic achievement, moreover, are not the ones who got the best marks five years earlier; they're the ones who were rated most helpful by their third-grade classmates and teachers. And middle schoolers who believe their parents value being helpful, respectful, and kind over excelling academically, attending a good college, and having a successful career perform better in school and are less likely to break rules.

In part, that's because concern for other people promotes supportive relationships and helps prevent depression. Students who care about others also tend to see their education as preparation for contributing to society—an outlook that inspires them to persist even when

studying is dull. In adulthood, generous people earn higher incomes, better performance reviews, and more promotions than their less generous peers. This may be because the meaning they find in helping others leads to broader learning and deeper relationships, and ultimately to greater creativity and productivity.

But kindness can also make kids happy in the here and now. In one experiment, toddlers received Goldfish or graham crackers for themselves, then were invited to give some of the food to a puppet who “ate” them and said “yum.” Researchers rated the children’s facial expressions, and found that sharing the treats appeared to generate significantly more happiness than receiving them. And the toddlers were happiest of all when the treats they gave came from their own bowl, rather than from somewhere else.

Psychologists call this the helper’s high. Economists refer to it as the warm glow of giving. Neuroscientists find that generosity activates reward centers in our brains. And evolutionary biologists observe that we’re wired to help others. A tribe of people who “were always ready to aid one another,” Darwin wrote, “would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.”

Of course, we should encourage children to do their best and to take pride and joy in their accomplishments—but kindness doesn’t require sacrificing those things. The real test of parenting is not what your children achieve, but who they become and how they treat others. If you teach them to be kind, you’re not only setting your kids up for success. You’re setting up the kids around them, too.

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