

Practical tips for building kindness in our kids

We're all born with the capacity for kindness, empathy and compassion but like language, it needs to be taught and witnessed in others. In this highly competitive, fast-paced world how do we teach our kids to be compassionate towards others (and themselves!) and to understand how others feel?

1. Be a role model.

Children learn about kindness from witnessing it firsthand, from their parents and caregivers. Our children need to see us behaving with compassion toward others and ourselves. Our responses in those moments model the compassion our child will then be able to apply themselves.

Our children are mirroring us and therefore the kind of language we use is important. How do we describe others? Are we understanding or judgmental? Tolerant or shaming? These are all things our children are copying. Talking badly about others in front of kids and saying things like 'She is mean,' or 'She is so annoying' is not empathic language because it isn't recognizing the emotions behind the action—it's labelling.

We can help our children find the reasons behind the labels 'He or she is annoying?' Do you think maybe he is hungry? Or could he be tired? Helping children understand the feelings behind behaviours and leading them to a kinder conclusion is teaching empathy, which is a building block for compassion and kindness.

2. Setting consistent rules and consequences

Boundaries and consequences create a safe environment for kids with clear expectations, which give children the tools and understanding of how to get their needs met. When our needs are met, we are more able to consider the needs of others.

Provide structure in the home and be consistent with following through with consequences. Make unacceptable behaviour, like hitting, always unacceptable—even if it's a special occasion. If something is unacceptable it must be unacceptable all the time.

3. Acts of kindness

Acts of kindness can teach children that they are a part of the world and that we all have a responsibility to care for every creature in it. Brainstorm with children ways to make others happy or the world a better place. Discuss and put into practice ways they can make a broader global impact, such as recycling or walking or biking rather than driving. Teach the value of giving, of doing good, of living and acting consciously and deliberately, without expectation of receiving. Help motivate children to make a difference, no matter how big or small. Volunteering as a family can be especially powerful; sponsoring a child, donating to the op shop, volunteering at a local club or group.

4. Monitor electronics

Parents can control and monitor how much (violent media) their kids consume - which may help prevent children from becoming sensitized.

5. Teach the value and management of anger – self regulation

Anger can be a major block to kindness because it can overwhelm childrens' brains and make the area of the brain responsible for compassion & kindness unavailable. Of course there are times when anger has value, however we can help our children to learn ways to proactively manage strong emotions through building their ability to self-regulate.

6. Understanding and naming emotions

Before we can be good at recognizing the emotions of others, we must be able to understand our own emotions.

Talk about feelings together. Come up with scenarios and ask your kids how that might make them feel. Help them boost their feelings vocabulary. You can even do this while reading books or looking at pictures of faces in magazines.

Validate your child's difficult emotions. Sometimes when our child is sad, angry, or disappointed, we rush to try and fix it right away, to make the feelings go away because we want to protect them from any pain. However, these feelings are part of life and ones that children need to learn to cope with. When we to label and validate those feelings it encourages children to do the same when interacting with others. Encourage your child to consider the feelings of others in specific situations; ask them how they might feel in the same situation (whether it's a sibling conflict or a situation at school).

Role play situations where empathy is critical: bullying, peer pressure, conflict with siblings/friends to help them prepare for challenges where empathy might be especially difficult (and important).

7. Watch, Read and Talk it out

See then discuss a movie in which people help others. This is a fun and entertaining way to teach compassion because kids love movies. As you watch television or movies with your child, be sure to point out instances where compassion was shown - or should have been shown. Talk about people who particularly need compassion. Help your child recognize the signs that someone else needs a helping hand and encourage your child to brainstorm ways to help.

Read all kinds of stories to children, not only happy ones. Talking about difficult emotions in books can be a fantastic way to build empathy and compassion.

8. Highlight the positive.

Recognise acts of kindness undertaken by your child. For example, if you see your child sharing or being a good friend, call attention to the act and talk about how that act made everyone feel as well as what the feelings could have been if the act of kindness hadn't happened.

9. Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness builds compassion in children. When a child is aware of their own feelings as well as people around them, they will have more of a chance to act in a kind way.

10. Self-compassion

We can't give our children something we don't have so building our self-compassion is a gift to both us as individuals and to our families. Parenting is hard and we don't always get it right and that's ok. Being understanding and forgiving of ourselves makes us better at forgiving our children and others.

11. Other Resources

Books for Grown Ups – The Whole Brain Child – Dan Siegel; Everyday Blessings – Jon & Myla Kabat-Zinn

Books for Kids - The Happiest Refugee Books, Have You Filled a Bucket Today?

Films for all of us – UP, Inside Out

Music – Passing Clouds by Kate Oliver

