

Questions About Kids

How Can I Help My Child To Be More Considerate?

We all want our children to become considerate, caring adults who display unselfish concern for the welfare of others. Given the high premium we placed on altruism, a major task of parenthood becomes how to shape an egocentric, demanding young creature into a more humane, charitable, and generous person.

The first part of the journey involves the development of a strong sense of self and a recognition of oneself as an independent individual—yes, the creation of an egocentric, demanding self! According to child psychologists, it is natural for a young child to be more interested and invested in getting his own needs met rather than meeting the needs of others. Not only is the concern for self a natural concern, it is a prerequisite of concern for others.

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Child development research also clearly shows that empathy leads to altruistic behavior. Empathy is defined as the capability of putting ourselves in someone else's place and imagining how he feels. Although we are all born with the capacity for empathy, it does not develop to the same extent in everyone. Fortunately, its development can be nurtured by the environment—most significantly by a child's parents.

Suggestions for Parents

Generally, most children begin to show some preliminary signs of empathy by the time they are 18 months of age. You may notice a child of this age respond to his mother's troubled look with an offer of a loved doll. Children of this age can be taught that their actions can cause feelings, good and bad, in others. For example, if you say the word "ouch" whenever she hurts someone else while pointing to the injured site, she will understand that she has made someone feel just like she feels when she has an "ouch."

You encourage empathy in a young child by making him aware of others' feelings and the reasons they feel the way they do. It is especially important to let your child know when he makes you feel bad or good. Let your child know that you expect her to care enough about your feelings to show her sensitivity.

As your child gets older, simple reminders such as, "Think how that would make you feel," will be sufficient to encourage empathy. Point out examples of people who are empathetic and those who are not. Communicate your admiration for kind, charitable people and actions.

Children do not learn to be considerate of others through talk alone. It is important for parents to model the golden rule. Children must be able to see situations in which people who are important to them treat others fairly. Set an example in your own respect for doing unto others as you would have them do to you. Preaching sermons on fair play cannot compete for your child's attention if he overhears you describe how you "put one over" on your boss. If, however, your son sees you tell the store clerk she gave you too much change, you have given him a model to imitate. It is also important to emphasize the good feelings that come from caring about others.

When we understand people's actions, it is difficult not to empathize.

One strategy you can use to promote empathy with an older child is to role play different situations. Ask your child to imagine the circumstances and experiences of someone he would harm. When we understand people's actions, it is difficult not to empathize.

As children become better able intellectually to understand the term "fair," you can begin to incorporate the concept into your discipline repertoire. A child of five, for example, can make this connection: "If you can't treat Susie as

you want to be treated, then you can't be with Susie right now.” Used as a disciplinary tool, removal from the situation carries with it a promise of return, but also a condition—you must show you know how the other person wants to be treated.

You may wish to seek out an early childhood program or other formal group that fosters altruistic behavior. Although it is quite common for programs to acknowledge the importance of fostering a positive self-concept, few programs list the development of altruism as one of their objectives. If, however, you see instances of adults giving recognition to children when they demonstrate caring behaviors, you can assume that the promotion of altruism is important to the program curriculum.

A further step in learning to treat others fairly occurs when a child becomes able to internalize parental standards. This happens when a child learns to say to himself the instructions he has heard from his parents. When he is about to take a toy from a peer, he hears his parent say it is wrong to take another's possessions without permission. When he is about to strike out in anger, he will remind himself (in much the same words his parents use) it is wrong to hit people. This developmental step prepares the child for a final stage of moral development which enables him to form personal standards. At this stage the child goes beyond following moral rules solely to please his parents. A child in this phase of development has decided on standards he wants to live up to regardless of the approval of parents, other adults, or peers.

A Word About Guilt

Parents sometimes wonder, “Is it good for a child to feel guilt?” When it comes to moral issues, such as when a child knowingly hurts another, the answer is yes. When we feel empathy for people we have harmed, we feel their pain, and we know we are the cause for that pain. This bad feeling, called guilt, is a powerful and necessary force for keeping destructive impulses in check. However, it is unfair to control a child through guilt that is provoked over non-moral issues such as how neat a child keeps her room or how he styles his hair.

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