

Creating Kindness

You cannot “teach” your child to be kind with long lectures. You must *teach* kindness by *doing* kindness -- both toward your children and toward others. Of course, there are perfect teaching moments where you can guide your child to choose kindness and there are books and television shows that try to teach kindness. But when a child does not see kindness acted out, it is VERY hard to turn words into unfamiliar actions. This means, the foundation to teaching kindness is by showing kindness in action.

The Core of Kindness

What is empathy? It is not sympathy. Sympathy is sharing the feelings of another. Empathy is understanding the feelings of another, even though you don’t necessarily share them. Empathy is the *core* of kindness. True kindness has to come from understanding others; it’s more than just being nice. Empathy may be something you have a lot of, or it may be something you need more of. The good news is that it is something you can work on and get better at. And when you grow in empathy, kindness will naturally come out of it.

Behavior is Communication

Children do what they do for a *reason*. When a child runs out of the room crying when you tell them to do a chore, or yells, “I hate you” when you ask them to brush their teeth, there is an underlying cause. Understanding that cause, the “why” of what your child is feeling, will help you to have empathy. And empathy will help you to respond with care and kindness. Even when their reactions seem irrational, we need to remember that their actions have reasons behind them.

Why is a child having a tantrum? Are they hungry? Are they tired? Have they been picked on at school? Understanding the *why* will help you show kindness and love in your responses, and compassion in your consequences.

Before reacting or responding to a situation, first ask yourself, “Is there a reason for my child’s behavior?” Then ask your child. Become a detective and find out the “*why*” behind the “*what*.”

Getting Started

The easiest way to get started is by watching your children. If your child starts crying when asked to do something, then stop and try to understand why. What is the underlying issue? Don’t accept the shallow explanation; it is easy AND hurtful to label a child wimpy or a cry baby. In fact, step back a moment and think about how you react or respond to your children’s behavior. Is it typically with harsh criticism, taunting, or shaming? If so, then that is how they will learn to respond to problems, frustrations, or others.

Work hard to understand your child's perspective. Don't ask yourself, "What would I feel?" Your child is unique and quite a bit younger than you are. Instead, say to yourself, "I know my child best, and these are the things I know about them." For example, "I know he likes to help, or is usually not so sensitive." Once you have a deeper understanding, then you can act. Use your understanding of their feelings to grow your empathy and react to them in kindness.

When to Teach

The more you practice kindness, the more you will want to be kind. Research shows that even random acts of kindness create a desire in us to be more kind in the future.¹ That means that the more you do, the more you will want to do. Working to increase your understanding, empathy, and kindness today will get that positive feedback cycle going right away.

There are many perfect moments in our day when we can teach kindness to our children, but it is done by teaching empathy. We do this by helping our children to understand the feelings of others. *The best moment to teach empathy is when another child does something hurtful to your child.* Often when someone hurts our child it brings out our protective instincts—and it should! But, when it is not an issue that must be addressed immediately, take a moment with your child and together try to understand the actions of the other child. Work together to try and grasp why the other child may be doing that. Do they want everyone to see them as tough? Are they new and trying to fit in? Are they hurting or struggling with something? Do they feel small and powerless? Are they being bullied somewhere? By considering these questions together with your child, you can teach empathy that will lead to kindness.

As you begin the process of teaching kindness through empathy, don't expect immediate change. Just continue to do what is right and what is kind. Show your love through your willingness to *stop* and *understand* your child's feelings and reactions, and the feelings of others. When empathy becomes a normal thing for you to do, you will then see your child grow in their kindness and love too.

Resources include:

1. Passmore J, Oades LG. Positive psychology techniques: random acts of kindness and consistent acts of kindness and empathy. *The Coaching Psychologist*. 2015;11(2):90-2.
2. Wispe L. The distinction between sympathy and empathy: To call forth a concept, a word is needed. *Journal of personality and social psychology*. 1986 Feb;50(2):314.