

Random Acts of Kindness Can Dramatically Change Children's Hearts

Stephen and his wife are parents of pre-teens. Their biggest challenge revolves around peer relationships. The kids disrespect one another and they don't earn many checks for "plays well with others" at school.

Then a friend suggested a new tactic. "Get them to help in the nursery or one of the preschool classes at church," he said. "And spend some time as a family volunteering where you have to serve others."

Desperate, Stephen made the arrangements. After some initial protest, the kids grudgingly accepted and, within just a few weeks, the family detected a subtle shift in the direction of kindness.

Another man tells of the radical change in his teenage son after the young man started babysitting for a child with special needs. It was as if the discipline of kindness worked to heal his own heart.

New research is documenting the effectiveness of such interventions. Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl of the University of British Columbia found that children who make an effort to perform acts of kindness are happier and experience greater acceptance from their peers. "We show that kindness has some real benefits for the personal happiness of children, but also for the classroom community" she said.

We all know a little thoughtfulness goes a long way. It is, perhaps, the most underestimated trait for true long-term success. Train your children to have generosity as their default setting, starting with their peers at school.

Here are five acts of kindness your kids can do for their classmates:

Be an encourager. Teach your children to encourage their peers, recognize friends' achievements, say "Have a great game," compliment a cool project, say "I hope you feel better" when they're sick, and smile when they do well.

Stand alongside other kids when they're alone. Simple proximity is an act of kindness. When a peer is sad, encourage your child to sidle up into their vicinity, sit at the same table, or join them in line. Nothing complicated, just deliberate presence.

Listen when they have a story (and laugh at their jokes). Listening is a kindness. Train your children in active listening skills. Paying attention to peers is a powerful act of kindness.

Watch out for the weak and the bullied. Some kids are victimized, awkward, or simply incompetent. Teach your child to be an advocate for the oppressed. Sometimes the favor of just one other child will tip the balance for a kid who might otherwise become a perpetual victim.

Pick a variety of kids for the team. This is a powerful one if your child is popular (of course they are!). Teach your child to include everyone, regardless of ability, when teams are chosen. Not just the least popular, but everyone. Train your child to accept every kid in their class as worthy of their time and attention.

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