



## Raising Kind Children

Encouraging kindness in children is an important responsibility for all adults who care for children. Kind and caring behavior appears early in life and continues to develop across the lifespan. Examples of caring behavior include:

- sympathetic crying among groups of babies
- a toddler comforting a baby doll
- a toddler sharing blocks with another child
- a preschooler bringing bandages to an injured classmate
- a preschooler hugging and comforting a crying sibling
- school-age children collecting canned goods for a food bank
- an adolescent volunteering to shovel snow for an elderly neighbor
- adolescents speaking out against animal cruelty during a community meeting. You can help children show kindness toward others and experience the positive feelings that grow out of kind and caring behavior.



Set a good example. Children are learning constantly from the words and actions of adults around them. The great humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, suggests that adults teach children in three important ways:

*The first is by example.*

*The second is by example.*

*The third is by example.*

Even with your busy schedule, you can involve children in acts of kindness. By helping an elderly neighbor, taking a stray dog to a shelter or giving canned goods to a food bank, you can demonstrate your concern for others. You can reinforce kindness by explaining to children why you want them to engage in kind behavior. Research says that children are more likely to comply with adults' wishes when they hear a reasonable and understandable explanation.

*"Aunt Jean has been visiting with Grandma all week long at the hospital, so she is really tired. Would you please play quietly so that she can rest and relax?"*

To be an effective adult role model, you must match your words with your actions. For example, if you compliment someone's new clothes, but make fun of the way the clothes look when the person is gone, children receive a powerful message. They learn that saying one thing and doing another is acceptable behavior.

Expressing appreciation for kind and thoughtful behavior is another way to set a good example for children. These actions help children to experience the positive feelings of being kind to others. By

reinforcing children's kind behavior, you are helping them to understand that their kindness makes a positive difference.

*"Corrina, I'm really glad that you shared the blocks with Andy. See how much he likes playing with them!"*

*"Lamont, your after-school project sounds like a great idea! I'm sure that the nursing home residents will really enjoy hearing you play some songs on the piano."*

Children need to know that the adults in their lives care about them and about others. Children who experience respect and appreciation from adults are more likely to demonstrate caring toward others and to recognize the positive impact of their kindness.

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## **Foundations in the early years (birth to age 5)**

### **Trust**

The quality of care you give to infants can greatly influence their later development. If babies learn that the adults around them are kind and dependable, they will learn to trust the world and themselves. When you respond sensitively to babies' needs, they feel valued and important. When infants feel loved and valued by those who care for them, the foundation of kindness toward others is being established.

### **Consistency**

If you express consistent expectations of children, they develop predictable views of the world. When guiding young children, be consistent and clear with directions and explanations. If your requests and reasons are inconsistent, children become confused and unsure about what is expected. When you are consistent with your requests and reasons, children feel safe in exploring the world and trying new things. They feel secure that their caregivers will consistently guide and teach them.

### **Positive guidance**

Children learn to care about others when they feel cared for themselves. Young children learn best when they are not frightened or angry. By using guidance based on love and respect, you can help young children become aware of the consequences of their behavior for others.

Research says that harsh physical punishment can hinder the development of positive relationships between children and adults. Reliance on physical discipline weakens children's trust in adults. Physical punishment does not help children learn self-control or understand the connection between unacceptable behavior and discipline. When adults use physical discipline, children feel angry with adults and ashamed of themselves.

Positive guidance blends respect and love for the child with clear messages and understandable reasons. When young children experience consistent and positive guidance, they are more likely to act kindly toward others.

## Building bridges between children and others (ages 6 to 12)

### Encourage children to think about others

You can help school-age children think about the needs of others and the implications of their behavior for others. Many school-age children are able to see the world through another's eyes. By encouraging this ability, you are helping children to reason and think about interpersonal matters. If a school-age child engages in unkind behavior with another child, explain to her or him why the behavior is unacceptable and how this behavior makes the other child feel.



### Create opportunities and express appreciation

During the school years, you can give children more responsibility for being helpful and kind to others. By creating opportunities for children to be helpful and kind, you also can tell them how much you appreciate their helpful behavior and how this behavior affects others.

For example, research says that assigning regular, family-oriented housework to 12- to 14-year-old children is associated with their spontaneous helping behavior. Children of this age who are expected to help set the table, walk the dog or take turns cleaning the family room are more likely to do nice things for others without being told.

Requiring children to do regular chores for a family or for an athletic team creates opportunities for you to express appreciation for their kindness. Few successful groups exist because of the kindness of one person; every person in the group needs to be helpful and to recognize that needs of the group are as important as needs of the individual members. Tell children how much their helpful behavior is appreciated so they can experience the good feelings that result from being kind to others.

## Table 1. Developmental milestones of kindness (8 months to 12 years)

Research has documented the development of kind behavior in children. Although there are differences in how and how often children act kindly toward others, almost all children go through a set sequence of developing kind and caring behavior. For example, some children may cry harder than others when a friend's cat is hit by a car, but almost all children will recognize this as a very sad situation.

Age	Characteristics	Example
8 to 18 Months	Child can understand that own behavior can make another happy or sad.	"If I make a silly face at Andrew, he will smile and laugh."
	Child can understand adult instructions for kind behavior when words are combined with actions.	Adult instructs: "Be gentle with the baby" and softly strokes baby's cheek and neck. Child can understand and imitate adult behavior.

2 to 3 Years	Child begins to show empathic behavior.	Child may spontaneously comfort a crying peer.
	Child complies more often with adult requests, especially adult requests for socially responsible behavior.	Child more willingly takes turns, says, "Please" and "Thank You", and helps clean up at home and in the classroom.
4 to 6 Years	Child starting to recognize concept of fairness.	"His piece of cake is bigger than mine!"
	Child begins to understand that selfish behavior may be wrong.	"If I use all of the play dough, no one else with be able to play with it."
	Child engages in more kinds of empathic behavior.	Child can share, comfort, protect, and encourage.
	Child can plan in advance to do something nice for another.	"When these winter clothes are too small, I can give them to someone who doesn't have enough winter clothes."
	Child can take perspective of another and can recognize possible reasons for another's feelings and actions.	"Jason is the new kid this year. I wonder if he's lonely because he hasn't made new friends yet?" "LaDonna is sad because her grandma just died."
6 to 12 Years	Child can understand right from wrong and think about what might happen after doing something wrong.	"Cheating during a game of checkers is wrong." "If I cheat and win the game, I might feel guilty."
	With adult assistance, child can recognize the implications of his/her own behavior for another.	"If I don't invite Felicia to my party, she might feel left out."
	Child begins to develop internalized kind behavior. Child can engage in kind behavior without encouragement and prompting from adults.	Child may try to "right a wrong" action, child experiences guilt without adult intervention, child may confess to a wrong behavior, child may apologize without being told.

## Practice empathy

Empathy is defined as "the ability to identify oneself mentally with a person or thing and so understand his/her feelings or meaning." You can practice empathic behavior and encourage school-age children to do the same. You can show them how empathy can help solve everyday problems.

Consider the natural disasters of the past decade. Entire communities have been destroyed by floods or fires and have been rebuilt because of the generous assistance of empathic groups and individuals. When these tragedies occur, talk with children about the needs of those affected and discuss different ways to help. Tell children that every little bit, from a donated coat to a large financial contribution, helps others who are in need.

Additionally, you can remind children that every day they will encounter other people's needs, and that by helping others they will experience the positive feelings that grow from acts of kindness. For example, how often do out-of-town visitors stop and ask for directions? When you and the children help travelers find what they are looking for, you reduce the negative feelings that go along with being lost. You can talk with children about how it feels to be lost and how it feels to help someone find what they are looking for.

Empathy also involves connecting with the feelings and needs of things other than people, such as animals and the environment. When driving along the highways, point out the brightly colored trash bags that often line the side of the road. Talk with children about the importance of keeping the environment clean for people and animals. Encourage children to participate in organized trash pick-up efforts and to practice recycling at home and at school.

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## Summary

Children are born with the capacity to act kindly toward others. From birth, children's behavior indicates their ability to respond kindly and compassionately. However, adults play an important role in whether or not children continue to act in kind and caring ways. If you are warm and supportive, and set reasonable standards of behavior and consistently enforce them, you are more likely to encourage kind and compassionate behavior in children. And, by encouraging children to be kind, you will find opportunities to talk about the consequences of their behavior for others and to express appreciation for their kindness.

The following suggestions are ways that you can contribute to the development of kind and caring children:

- Set a good example by acting respectfully toward others.
- Communicate the importance of helpfulness and generosity.
- Use consistent rules and reasons for guiding children.
- Talk with children about the feelings of others and the consequences of children's unkind behavior.
- Create opportunities for children to be empathic.
- Express appreciation when children behave kindly toward others.

*Source: Clark, Janet A., Gable, Sara, Barakat, Ibtisam. (n.d.). Raising kind children. University of Missouri Extension*

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