

Eight Tips to Developing Caring Kids

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There is a word we researchers use to refer to voluntary behavior that aims to help another, like sharing, or providing comfort: “prosocial.” Although most parents and teachers would say they value prosocial behavior in children and want to encourage it, it is important to note that not all prosocial behaviors are equal. They can be performed for a variety of reasons, ranging from the self-oriented desires (e.g., to get approval from peers, or to get something in return) to more altruistic reasons (e.g., because of concern for another person or the desire to act on one’s personal values). Most adults would prefer to help children develop behaviors that are performed for the latter reasons rather than for selfish reasons. Unfortunately, it often is impossible to know children’s motives for assisting another, but there are things we can do to promote other-oriented or value-based (altruistic) behaviors.

What Not to Do: Rewards

First, one thing that is not advised is encouraging prosocial actions by giving children concrete rewards such as candy or money for their behavior. Providing rewards appears to encourage prosocial behavior primarily when it has a benefit for the child. Providing praise or approval for helping behavior probably does not undermine children’s prosocial development, although it is not clear that approval, by itself, is very effective at promoting children’s concern for others and their welfare.

Be Aware of Children’s Capacity for Empathy and Sympathy

An important tool for fostering children’s prosocial behavior is their capacity for empathy and sympathy. Empathy involves feeling another’s emotion, or feeling an emotion consistent with what another person would be expected to feel in a given situation. For example, if a girl views a boy who is sad and she feels sad as a consequence, that is empathy. Or if a boy reads about children who are victims of an earthquake and feels sad, that also is empathy.

After feeling empathy, children often experience sympathy, which is concern or sorrow for another person. Although it is likely that sympathy often stems from experiencing another’s emotions (empathy), it can also occur when a person tries to take the perspective of another. Thus, children may experience sympathy without actually first experiencing another’s emotional state (e.g., they may only know what the person is experiencing). Feelings of sympathetic concern for another often provide the motivation for both children and adults to help another.

Surprisingly, even children in the second year of life seem to experience empathy and sometimes help others—usually familiar people—when they experience it. Moreover, as children develop a better understanding that others’ feelings are not the same thing as their own feelings, they begin to develop rudimentary sympathy in the early years. These capacities for empathy and sympathy can be exploited by adults.

How do adults promote empathy and especially sympathy in children?

Heighten Children’s Awareness of the Emotions of Others

This can be done by discussing others’ emotions in everyday conversations and informally teaching children about how events are associated with specific emotions. Adults can also point out how others who are not in the child’s everyday world feel—for example, that poor children who receive food during

a famine would feel happy to get food.

Point Out the Consequences of Actions and Try to Understand the Other's Feelings

Misbehavior that has negative consequences for others is a great time to foster empathy, such as when a child hurts a peer's feelings or acts aggressively against another child. In such a situation, adults can point out the consequences of the child's actions and help the child understand what the other person is feeling and thinking. With young children, this technique—which we call inductive reasoning—must involve simple ideas and language, such as “see, you made Mary cry.” With older children, the adult can elaborate more. With young children, such inductions appear to be more effective if delivered with some emotional force—that is, if the parent is emotionally involved and seems concerned or even a bit upset. The adult's emotion likely serves to focus the child's attention on what the adult is saying and to communicate that the message is important.

Adults can also strengthen a child's capacity for empathy and sympathy by being supportive and sensitive. Children are better able to attend to others' emotions and needs if their own needs are met. Moreover, the supportive adults in a child's life provide empathic models to imitate. Many studies indicate that children tend to follow the modeling of adults (as well as peers) who show concern or exhibit prosocial behavior.

In addition, warm parenting has been found to be associated over time with the development of children's skills in regulating their actions. Children who are well-regulated tend to experience sympathy rather than be overwhelmed by the negative emotion experienced when empathizing. When people cannot manage their empathic arousal, experiencing the pain of others can be a tremendously negative experience; when this occurs, individuals focus on alleviating their own distress rather than that of a needy other. Moreover, when parents use harsh discipline, children tend to focus on their own needs and on avoiding punishment rather than attend to the needs of others.

Help Children Learn the Skills for Dealing with Their Emotions

Adults can also foster children's sympathy by helping them learn to deal with their emotions. For example, when children experience negative emotions in their own lives, adults can teach them ways to actively deal with stressors (e.g., help them develop study skills or discuss ways to deal with negative experiences at school). In contrast, when parents minimize children's negative emotion (e.g., say “it is not that bad”) or punish children for expressing their own negative feelings, children tend to be relatively low in sympathy.

Minimize Punishment, Maximize Support

Perhaps the most important way to enhance children's prosocial behavior, as discussed above, is through children's capacity for empathy and sympathy. However, both parents and teachers can promote prosocial behavior in additional ways. Supportive and sensitive rather than punitive parenting and discipline are not only related to sympathy, but also to children's tendencies to experience guilt and moral tendencies more generally.

Opportunities to Give—Community Service

Children who are encouraged to engage in activities that benefit others are more likely to help in the future, as long as they did not initially feel forced to help. For example, adults can provide children with opportunities to donate small amounts of money to others or make toys or reading materials for needy children.

Help Children Develop Perceptions of Themselves as Being Prosocial

Adults can take advantage of the occasions when children engage in prosocial actions by attributing such actions to a prosocial disposition. As an example, when a child helps or shares with another, the adult can say, “you helped because you are a generous person.” For children about seven years or older, such statements may foster the self-perception that they are generous and helpful, which serves to motivate future prosocial actions.

In summary, parents, teachers, and other adults in a child’s life can increase the likelihood of children’s behaving prosocially by helping children understand others’ feelings and how their actions affect others; by modeling prosocial actions; by providing supportive rather than punitive socialization and discipline; by providing children with opportunities to assist others (opportunities that are perceived by the child as voluntary); and by attributing children’s prosocial actions to the child’s personality or character. Moreover, helping children regulate their own emotions likely not only promotes children’s sympathy, but provides them with the resources to deny themselves when it benefits another. ■