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8 Ways to Teach Compassion to Kids

By Signe Whitson

Whenever I have the occasion to speak with professionals and parents about the challenges of bringing an end to bullying in schools and communities, I emphasize that “big” solutions — such as policies, procedures, and trainings (I say, humbly, as a Bullying Prevention trainer) are trumped each and every day by the seemingly little, yet extraordinarily powerful, acts of compassion and kindness that adults show to the young people in their lives. In turn, experts agree that fostering compassion in young people is among the best ways to prevent verbal, physical, and emotional aggression from taking root. Below, I detail eight ways to help your child and/or student develop compassion both as a character trait and a behavioral style:

1. Walk the Talk

Children may listen to your words, but more importantly, they learn from observing your actions. When you have a chance to practice a random act of compassion, do so! When you are frustrated in an interpersonal interaction, express your displeasure in words that show respect for the dignity of the person you are addressing. When you encounter a person who needs help, stop what you are doing and tend to them, even (read: especially!) if it is not particularly convenient to do so. Remember: opportunities to show compassion do not occur by appointment. Show young people that anytime is the right time to engage in acts of service and compassion for others.

2. Put the Child on the Receiving End of Compassion

While showing compassion to others is a top way to teach this value to a child, allowing a young person to experience compassion first-hand is even more impactful. When your child is hurt or sick, be sure to provide abundant TLCC (tender, loving, compassionate care.) It may sound obvious, but tending to a child when he is feeling down or under the weather is the best way to teach him how to show compassion to others.

3. Talk the Talk

Most children can learn about true compassion by seeing and feeling this trait acted out, but when parents talk explicitly about acts of compassion, they communicate its importance as a prized family value. As you watch television or movies with your child, be sure to point out instances where compassion was shown — or should have been shown! Talk about people who particularly need compassion, such as the elderly and children living in poverty.

4. Volunteer Your Time

When children become actively involved in acts of showing compassion to others, they learn about this value in a very deep and enduring way. Find age-appropriate ways to introduce your child to volunteering, such as visiting a nursing home and sharing a craft activity with a resident, serving a meal at a homeless shelter, helping to organize a canned food drive, collecting coats to donate to needy children, or even participating in a charity walk for a specific cause. These activities are at once meaningful and fun, which makes them especially effective in getting kids to routinely think compassionately about the needs of others.

5. Care for a Pet

Bringing a pet into a family is certainly not a step to be taken lightly or impulsively, but it is worth giving serious consideration to providing your young person with the experience of caring for an animal, as a way to foster compassion. Children who care for pets learn important values such as responsibility, unconditional love, empathy, and compassion for all living things.

6. Read All About It

Children's books are great for providing a window into the experiences of others. As a School Counselor, my go-to children's writer is Trudy Ludwig, the award-winning author of such books as *My Secret Bully* (my all-time favorite pick for sparking conversations with kids about bullying and relational aggression) and *The Invisible Boy*, a great read for inspiring empathy and compassion for young people who find themselves on the periphery of school social hierarchies. For older kids, check out biographies of famous figureheads of compassion, such as the Dalai Lama or Mother Theresa.

7. Compassion It™

In recent years, rubber wristbands have become a ubiquitous symbol of causes and concerns. While most of the messages are positive and inspiring, I must admit that their sheer commonness resulted in me stopping reading the various messages on friends' wrists. Until recently. I noticed a two-tone band that a relative was turning over and felt compelled to ask about it. It was a Compassion It band, she explained. Every morning, she puts the band on her wrist with its black side facing outward, as a personal reminder to act compassionately toward someone else. When such an act is committed each day, she turns the bracelet to its white side.

What a great idea — so simple, yet such a powerful reminder to prioritize kindness and make compassion a part of her everyday routine. Needless to say, I went online and bought a band for myself and one for each of my daughters right away. Does this turn compassion into a chore, you may ask. Am I making kindness into a To-Do list item for my kids, you wonder. Nope, not at all, I say with confidence. Quite the contrary: the bands have turned compassion into an everyday topic of conversation in our household and has effectively elevated kindness into a priority in each of our days. Best. Bracelet. Ever.

8. Make a Wish

Acts of life-changing compassion can be only a click away. Use the internet to introduce your child to different charitable organizations that provide compassionate assistance to others. The Make-a-Wish Foundation provides hope, strength, and joy to children with life-threatening medical conditions. While for younger kids, the site may be too heart-wrenching or scary, older kids can have a truly impactful experience of being able to provide tangible help and joy to a peer. The experience can be life-changing for both giver and receiver.

Signe Whitson is a school counselor, author, and national speaker on topics related to stopping bullying and promoting children's mental health. For workshop inquiries or additional information, please visit www.signewhitson.com.

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