

A GIVING SPIRIT: Ideas for raising compassionate kids

by Melanie Bowden

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."--Winston Churchill

Every parent hopes that their children will grow into caring, empathetic adults. But it can be hard to know how to develop your child's giving nature when you're in the thick of playdates, homework, sport practices, and getting ready for the holidays. Refer to the following list of tips to help you bring out the best in your child--no matter what the season.

ALLOWANCE: Encourage your children to set aside a portion of their allowance for a charitable cause. If they want to help animals, maybe they can donate to the SPCA. If they are concerned about natural disasters, maybe it's the Red Cross. Talk to them about what percentage of the household income you designate to charities and why.

ATTITUDE: "When my daughter comments on people in need I say, 'What do you think we could do to help that person?'" says Rachel Hansen, mother of one. "It's too easy for adults to develop a cynical attitude or get burned out, but we can try to see through our children's eyes to reawaken our own compassion, as well as nurturing theirs."

CLOTHES: Periodically help your children sort through their clothes and decide which ones they would like to pass onto others either by giving them to friends or family or donating them to a charity. You can do the same with toys.

CONFLICTS: Jan Plotkin, a mother of two, says, "I think that conflict or decision making times are perfect opportunities to discuss a giving nature so that the child can see different points of view and then arrive at a resolution by herself. Often, in my experience, the child arrives at a giving decision." So when your kids are fighting over a toy remind them, "We have one toy and two children. How are you going to work this out?"

DISCUSSIONS: Have family talks about how each member would like to make a difference. Do you want to help improve your school, church, local park, or a community in another part of the world? Use the internet to explore different organizations based on your family's interests.

GARAGE SALES: One year my oldest daughter and her friends organized a garage sale where they didn't put prices on items. Instead they asked for monetary donations to a local charity. The girls were thrilled with the amount of money they raised and really touched by buyers' generosity. The same could be done with a lemonade stand or car wash.

GROCERIES: "While grocery shopping, have your child pick out some canned goods to donate to your local food bank," says Stacy DeBroff, founder of Mom Central. "Even very young kids can pick colorful cans or a box of macaroni or a can of spaghetti-O's."

HOLIDAYS: “Adopt a needy child or family to buy gifts for during the holiday season,” suggests DeBroff. “Have your child help you pick out and wrap the gifts.”

ICE CREAM: If you donate blood, bring your children along. No, they don’t have to watch the needle go into your arm. However, they will see that donating not only makes you feel good, but gets you juice and cookies and sometimes a coupon for a pint of Baskin-Robbins ice cream.

LETTERS: Mimi Doe, co-author of *10 Principles of Spiritual Parenting*, sees value in encouraging your child to write one letter a week. “Suggest they write to family members, authors, heroes, newspapers, nursing homes,” she says. “Send drawings or cut out articles of interest to the recipient. Write to the new family in town, the new teacher at school, the family in the local paper whose house burned down, or the bus driver. When a child reaches out to write, he touches the life of another.”

MIRROR: “Parents have a great power to shape our children's character by our example, and by the words we use, the way we mirror our children's actions to them,” says Linda Kavelin Popov, co-founder of The Virtues Project and the author of *The Family Virtues Guide*. “When a child shows natural compassion, such as a toddler patting someone who is crying, we can say ‘Thank you for being kind, Jonathan.’ When they share a toy with another child, we would acknowledge their generosity in sharing. When they resist sharing, we can call them to generosity: ‘Jonathan, you need to find your generosity today so your friend will be happy too.’”

ROLE MODEL: “Children learn what they see, so if a parent is generous, gives to charity, and volunteers, the child will see it as natural and follow in the footsteps of the behavior,” says Kiki Weingarten, a Life and Career Education Coach.

RUN/BIKE/SWIM : Check out the Things To Do Near You! section at active.com. The site lists community sporting events that both encourage children to participate and donate proceeds to charitable causes. You can also search a particular charity's website to see if they have an event coming up.

SHOES: Lissa Coffey, author of *Getting There: 9 Ways to Help Your Kids Learn What Matters Most in Life*, suggests the following activity to encourage empathy: “Trade shoes with someone in your family and walk around the house trying to see things from that person’s point of view. Does a child notice the dirty kitchen now that he’s in mom’s shoes? How does she feel about it? Does dad notice the broken yo-yo string when he’s in the child’s shoes? How can he help?”

SOUP KITCHENS: Be sure your child is ready before she volunteers at a soup kitchen or shelter. “First visit the location yourself and making sure the experience will be age-appropriate,” advises DeBroff. “Prepare your child beforehand by discussing what she will experience, and how much her work will help the children and their families.”

TEACHERS: Last year my family organized a drive to send school supplies to children in Iraq through the organization, Operation Iraqi Children. Thank goodness I told my fourth grader’s teacher. She organized a classroom read-a-thon, inspiring her students to raise their own money for the cause. The students then

shopped for and packed up school kits. Teachers can be especially effective in bringing out the best in your children.

SIDEBAR:

RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING A GIVING NATURE

- 1) Compassionatekids.com - A website dedicated to helping teach children compassion towards the Earth, people, and animals.
- 2) *The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves* by Linda Kavelin Popov, Dan Popov and John Kavelin, Plume Publishing, 1997
- 3) *Getting There! 9 Ways to Help Your Kids Learn What Matters Most in Life* by Lissa Coffey, Tuttle Publishing, 2000
- 4) Operation Iraqi Children: www.operationiraqichildren.org
- 5) *Share and Take Turns* by Cheri J. Meiners, Free Spirit Publishing, 2003
- 6) *10 Principles of Spiritual Parenting: Nurturing Your Child's Soul* by Mimi Doe and Marsha F. Walch, Harper Paperbacks, 1998

Whenever she donates blood, writer Melanie Bowden loves that the nurses tell her to eat heartily the rest of the day.