

# Children Learn by Watching Mom

The great humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, suggests that mothers teach children in three important ways: The first is by example. The second is by example. The third is by example.

I am very blessed to be the age I am and to still have my mother in good health and a part of my life. My Mom has always taught me by her example of compassion toward others. I have also been blessed to observe my wife as she taught our three children through her example of compassion toward others, and now I watch my daughter and daughter-in-law do the same with their children.

I believe children are born with the capacity to act with compassion toward others.

Encouraging compassion in children is an important responsibility for all mothers. Kind and caring behavior appears early in life and continues to develop across the lifespan. You can help children show compassion toward others and experience the positive feelings that grow out of kind and caring behavior. Children are learning constantly from the words and actions of their mothers' and other adults around them.

Even with mom's busy schedule, she can involve children in acts of compassion. By helping an elderly neighbor, taking a stray dog to a shelter or giving canned goods to a food bank, mom can demonstrate her concern for others. She can reinforce compassion by explaining to her children why she wants them to engage in kind behavior. Children are more likely to comply with mom's wishes when they hear a reasonable and understandable explanation. Michael and Aidan, "Aunt Amy's baby is due soon and she is really tired. Would you please play quietly so that she can rest and relax?"

To be an effective role model, moms must match their words with their actions. For example, if mom 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, mothers are helping them to understand that their compassion makes a positive difference. "Madison, I'm really glad that you shared the blocks with Carley and Ben. See how much they like playing with them!" "Carley, 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.

**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 parents/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 at 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.

**Encourage children to think about others** We 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 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.

**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.

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.

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, mothers 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.

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