

Kids Who Care: The Development of Empathy, Care, and Compassion

Peggy Patten

All parents hope to raise their children with strong moral character, with the capacity to be compassionate, and with the necessary skills to form healthy, satisfying relationships with others. Throughout life, children and adults must work cooperatively, compassionately, and empathetically for family, community, and societal groups to function (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). Empathy, or being able to “feel the feelings of others” (Barnet & Barnet, 1998, p. 164), is at the heart of moral and prosocial development and motivates a person to do something on behalf of another. Prosocial behavior is intended to benefit others and is a key ingredient of good quality social interactions between individuals and among groups (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Turiel, 1998; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Empathy drives moral actions, moral judgments, and principles (Turiel, 1998). Empathy promotes understanding of others, which is believed to increase prosocial behavior.

Stages of Empathy

Many developmental specialists believe that children begin to feel empathy and compassion in four stages.

Stage one: Happens during the first year of life and is characterized by the “global distress” felt by infants when they hear another baby’s cry which may start a chain reaction causing every baby within earshot to start crying too.

Stage two: Between 1 and 2 years of age, “egocentric empathy” is observed in toddlers who sometimes imitate the distress of another child by falling down and whining when another child has done so.

Stage three: Emerges at about 2 or 3 years of age, when children begin to empathize with emotions other than distress. These emotions can include disappointment, fear, surprise, sadness, anger, and

enjoyment. This third stage of empathic development is referred to as “empathy for another’s feelings.”

Final stage: Occurs later in childhood, at approximately 8 years of age, and is called “empathy for another’s life conditions.” Children at this time have wider life experiences and a better understanding of abstract concepts that enable them to imagine the pleasure or pain of another person or group of people, such as the homeless or those in other parts of the world (Barnet & Barnet, 1998; Turiel, 1998).

Parents’ Role in the Development of Empathy

While a child’s culture and temperament influences a child’s predisposition for empathy and compassion, there is strong evidence that parents’ child rearing practices affect empathic development (Barnet & Barnet, 1998; Kohn, 2000). Alfie Kohn, author of *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life*, outlines six ways that parents can encourage caring, prosocial, empathic behavior in children.

1. *Encouraging Secure Attachment and Nurturing.* During infancy, children’s behaviors are organized largely around one parent or adult caregiver. The infant’s crying, holding, and social behaviors are directed toward this person when the child is tired, fearful, ill, or hungry. The infant’s behavior, emotional experience, and ability to regulate his or her feelings develop largely as a result of the primary caregiver’s responsiveness to the infant (Carlson, 1998). These early attachment patterns have been shown to influence patterns of social development in later years. Children with secure parent-child attachments—attachments in which children’s emotional needs are sensitively met and the parent figure is

available and responsive to the child's needs—are generally more socially competent than children with insecure parent child attachments—those in which children's emotional needs are not met or are met insensitively or inconsistently (Turner, 1991).

Children's peer relationships build on the relationship that a child has with his or her parents. Children who have not had the benefit of nurturing adults early in life have difficulty forming friendships and negotiating the ups and downs of their relationships with others (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). Warm, caring, empathic parents help the child to perceive the world as a kind and safe place. A child who is not burdened by his or her own emotional and physical needs has less difficulty being open to the needs of others (Kohn, 2000).

2. *Guiding and Explaining.* Parents who value sharing, caring, and helping others are more likely to have children who develop similar values. In contrast, parents who are defensive, self-centered, and distrustful of others are more likely to have children who also view the world in “us” versus “them” terms. It is evident to children whether their parents interact with others with hands outstretched or with fists clenched (Kohn, 2000). In addition to a commitment to prosocial behaviors, parents help by explaining why such behaviors are important and appreciated. “I saw you help out the girl who fell off her bicycle. That was very kind of you!” Conversely, parents should also explain how behaving selfishly or aggressively harms others. “You made your brother cry when you took away his ball. That wasn't very kind.” Not saying anything when a child acts selfishly or with cruelty, according to Kohn, sends a message just as clearly as saying something (Kohn, 2000).

3. *Modeling.* Parents who model generosity and behave charitably toward others—versus simply talking about the importance of these behaviors—are more likely to have children who show generosity toward others. These acts of caring need not be grandiose to matter. Small acts of kindness such as helping a neighbor, taking a stray animal to a shelter, offering a kind word to a homeless person, provide powerful examples for children (American Psychological Association, 1997). Kohn cites research that

illustrates the power of modeling. In interviews with those who rescued Jews during World War II from the Nazis and those who worked for racial justice during the Civil Rights era, the subjects reported that their parents had provided living examples of altruistic, prosocial behavior (Kohn, 2000).

4. *Promoting a Prosocial Self-Image.* Parents who encourage their children's opportunities to experience caring and helping—caring for younger siblings, running errands for an ill neighbor, offering assistance to elderly grandparents—come to view themselves as helpful and caring people. Many organizations and churches have volunteer opportunities for children and parents to provide care and support for others in the community—through a shelter for the homeless, a nursing home, a food pantry, or an after-school tutoring program. It is important, Kohn notes, that children develop the idea that they offered help and care because of their altruism rather than as a result of external pressure or reward. The goal is for children to develop internal motives to act rather than depend on external rewards to provoke their altruistic behavior. Kohn has published an ERIC Digest, *The Risks of Rewards* (1994), and a book, *Punished by Rewards* (1993), on how external rewards can undermine the kinds of behaviors parents and teachers wish to encourage in children, such as the desire to help others for its own sake.

5. *Practice Cooperating.* Parents who provide opportunities for children to learn and play cooperatively, rather than competitively, confer many benefits. Benefits include higher-quality learning and achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved perspective taking, and greater generosity (Kohn, 2000). It is not clear from research whether competition suppresses generosity more than cooperation enhances it. Kohn notes that the harmful effects of competition have been noted in adults as well as children. Parents should look for opportunities for children to experience cooperative activities in home, at school, and in extracurricular activities. Doing so can be a challenge in the hyper-individualism of our age, and in a culture that often encourages a “win at all costs” attitude.

6. *Taking Children Seriously*. Parents who take their children seriously, treating them as a person whose feelings, preferences, and questions matter, are themselves behaving in a caring, empathic way. In doing so, parents are more likely to interact in the ways described above—guiding and explaining, communicating and modeling prosocial values, and providing opportunities for children to be a caring person as well. Kohn notes that while a child’s preferences cannot always be accommodated, they can always be considered and need never be dismissed (Kohn, 2000).

Raising children who care about others is a challenging task. At times, parents must swim against a cultural tide that encourages self-absorption, materialism, and a “what’s in it for me?” attitude—messages that run counter to the values of empathy, care, and compassion. Parents can override many of the harmful influences of modern culture by the examples of generosity and care they provide, through the guidance and opportunities they give their children to be caring and helpful, and by their consistent love, care, and nurturing.

For More Information

Kohn, Alfie. (1992). *The brighter side of human nature: Altruism empathy in everyday life*. New York: Basic.

Patten, Peggy. (2000). Marital relationships, children, and their friends: What’s the connection? An interview with E. Mark Cummings. *Parent News* [Online], 6(3). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/2000/pnew500/int500a.html> [2001, February 2].

Walsh, David. (1994). *Selling out America’s children: How America puts profits before values and what parents can do*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press. ERIC Document No. ED411089

Sources

American Psychological Association. (1997). *What makes kids care? Teaching gentleness in a violent world* [Online]. Available: <http://>

helping.apa.org/family/altruism.html [access date 2001, January 29].

Barnet, Ann B., & Barnet, Richard J. (1998). *The youngest minds: Parenting and genes in the development of intellect and emotion*. New York: Simon & Schuster. ERIC Document No. ED422120.

Brazelton, T. Berry, & Greenspan, Stanley. (2000, Fall/Winter). Our window to the future. *Newsweek* Special Edition, pp. 34-36.

Carlson, Elizabeth A. (1998). A prospective longitudinal study of attachment disorganization/disorientation. *Child Development*, 69(4), 1107-1128.

Eisenberg, Nancy, & Fabes, Richard A. (1998). *Prosocial development. Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 701-778). New York: Wiley and Sons.

Kohn, Alfie. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.

Kohn, Alfie. (1994). The risks of rewards. ERIC Digest [Online]. Available: <http://ericece.org/pubs/digests/1994/kohn94.html> [2001, February 2] (ERIC Document No. 376990)

Kohn, Alfie. (2000). Raising children who care. *NAMTA Journal*, 25(2), 185-206.

Turiel, Elliot. (1998). The development of morality. *Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 863-932). New York: Wiley and Sons.

Turner, Patricia J. (1991). Relations between attachment, gender, and behavior with peers in preschool. *Child Development*, 62(6), 1475-1488.

Source of This Document

Patten, Peggy. (2001). Kids Who Care: The Development of Empathy, Care, and Compassion. *Parent News* [Online], 7(1). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/2001/pnew101/int101c.html>