



How to Raise Kind Kids: Six Tips to Share with Parents

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At an independent school I visited some years ago, the head described what she felt was a recent success with parents. “This past fall,” she said, “we started sending home a weekly *Tips for Parents* page. Just a single page with a couple of bulleted suggestions on a specific topic—homework, sibling conflict, controlling screens, practical things like that. We stopped sending them during the Christmas break and intended to resume right after that, and when we didn’t, we had parents ask us, ‘What happened to the *Tips for Parents* page?’ They said they missed it. I think our young parents, in particular, are trying to figure out how to parent and appreciate any help they can get.”

In building a strong home-school relationship, and especially in recruiting parents as full partners in character education, our first task is supporting them in being the best parents they can be. That means helping them build a solid base of knowledge about



children and the complex art of raising them. Providing that knowledge can include

- good speakers
- a parent book-and-video resource center in the school lobby
- parent support groups that meet in homes
- a monthly letter from the head on what the school is doing in character education and how to help at home
- a steady stream of useful information like *Tips for Parents*, CSEE podcasts geared for parents, or a good article that treats a topic in a bit more depth.

As an example of the last of those ideas, let me offer a set of strategies for tackling a challenge that looms large in our increasingly divided and abrasive culture: raising kind kids. Kindness is caring about the needs and feelings of others and acting in ways that contribute to their happiness. It's a teachable virtue, but we have to make it a priority. What follows are six ways to do that.

1. Practice what you preach.

Cultivating kindness in family life begins with modeling it in word and deed. When I asked my 7-year-old granddaughter, Winnie, "How can parents teach their children to be kind?", she replied: "They should be kind to them." Children learn the meaning of kindness by the treatment they receive.

We can set an example of kindness and respect by how we talk to each other as adults. When we argue, we should avoid abusive language and make up quickly. Our children

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also learn from how we treat and talk about persons outside the family such as relatives, neighbors, and teachers. In general, we should try to minimize uncharitable talk about others—and explain why it's not kind or respectful ("We don't like it when people say bad things about us behind our backs").

But kids don't automatically copy our good example, and even usually nice kids will have their mean moments. What should you do when your child is *not* kind?

2. Correct hurtful acts clearly and with feeling.

A study of toddlers 1½ to 2½ years of age observed how they responded to another toddler's crying on the playground. About a third offered comfort or help.

The compassionate toddlers, the researchers found, had mothers who were high on warmth and nurturing. But these moms

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did something else as well: They had, in the past, taken it very seriously when their own child hurt someone.

For example, a 2-year-old girl who responded compassionately to the crying child on the playground had once gotten upset and pulled another little girl's hair. When she did that, her mother had responded in a firm but collected tone:

"You *hurt* Amy!" (pointing out the effect on the other child)

"Pulling hair hurts!" (an instructive generalization)

"NEVER pull hair!" (a small moral absolute).

By this combination of *clear teaching* and *emotional concern*, this mother sent a strong message to her daughter: Hurting is a big deal. As a result, this child was more likely to

take it seriously and respond compassionately when she saw another child crying on the playground. By contrast, the children who did not respond compassionately to a crying toddler had mothers who, in the past, had reacted more casually when their child had done something hurtful ("Now that's not nice, don't do that.").

The takeaway? Character formation trains the heart as well as the mind. We want a child not just to know that something is wrong but also to *feel* that it is wrong. Most adults, and arguably even most kids, know what's right and wrong, but many nevertheless often do what they know is wrong and feel little remorse for having done so. Bland parental responses to hurtful behavior won't produce an active conscience in a child.

3. *Require restitution.*

We don't want correction to end with our child feeling bad. Kids should learn that when they do something wrong, they can do something right to make up for it. Apologizing is the first thing they should do; the second thing is to ask, "What can I do to make up for it?" *Restitution is an apology of action.*

If our kids forget to ask, "What can I do to make up for it?", we can remind them to do that. Then we can suggest an appropriate restitution. For example:

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- “You can make up for not being nice to your brother by reading him a story while I’m getting the dinner on.”
- “I need some help in the yard. You can make up for being in such a sour mood earlier by helping cheerfully now.”
- “Please write me a sincere apology saying why you’re sorry and how you’re going to remember not to do this in the future.”

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Once kids have had some practice making restitution, we can shift more of the responsibility to them: “What do *you* think you can do to make things right?” Whenever possible, restitution should include teaching empathy (e.g., “You hurt your sister’s feelings—what can you do to make her feel better?”).

4. Practice the positive.

“Virtues aren’t mere thoughts,” Aristotle pointed out, “but habits we develop by performing virtuous actions.” For kids to develop the habit of speaking and acting kindly, they need lots of practice. That includes opportunities to self-correct.

If your 9-year-old son asks his 7-year-old sister for something in a snappish or bossy manner, you can say, “What would be a kinder, more respectful way to say that?” Let them know ahead of time that you’ll be doing this. Explain that this isn’t to embarrass them but to give them a chance to set

things right. The message: “You know better. Try that again.”

Whenever possible, try to anticipate and head off problems. One mother said her 7-year-old son hasn’t yet learned to read and is embarrassed about that. His 10-year-old sister Kelly reads exceptionally well. Recently, when Kelly brought some friends over to the house, she introduced her little brother by saying, “This is my brother—he can’t read.”

The mother said to me, “Kelly speaks without thinking about the impact of her words, and just isn’t good at putting herself in someone else’s shoes.” Kelly will need coaching from her mother about how to handle different social situations—even role-playing what she might say to make others feel good and not bad. I also suggested asking Kelly to help her brother with his reading—an act of kindness with the potential to increase her empathy and caring.

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5. Assign regular responsibilities in family life.

At the heart of kindness is a spirit of helpfulness. Polls now find that most American parents feel they've spoiled their children. In too many families, adults are doing all the giving, kids all the taking. That's a recipe for producing selfish, entitled kids like the 15-year-old boy who said, "Why should I mow the lawn? It's not my lawn."

The best antidote for that kind of ungrateful self-centeredness is for children to have regular, meaningful responsibilities in their family from the earliest years. Research finds when children have chores—jobs they're not paid to do, but ones they're expected to do as contributing family members—they develop a greater concern for

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others. Here's a mom who began responsibility training early:

Ever since my children have been able to walk, I've made them pick up their toys. When we found we were expecting another baby, I explained that I would be very busy with the baby and would need their help.

My 3-year-old brings the wash down every day and gets diapers, etc. when I need them. He feels good about helping and being part of the family. He also understands that by helping me do things around the house, he gives me more time to do things with him.

6. Read books that cultivate kindness.

With all kids and especially with kids for whom kindness doesn't come naturally, good books can be one of our best allies. There are scores of books, fiction and nonfiction, with strong character themes (www.readbrightly.com). The more kids read them—with us or on their own—the more they'll be immersed in goodness and attracted to it.

Pause during a read-aloud to ask when you and your child may have shown the virtue exhibited by someone in the story. Also consider sharing when you may have neglected to be helpful, such as not doing anything when you saw someone being picked on or excluded. What would you do



differently in the future? Children's books that depict peer cruelty and exclusion and everyone's need for friendship—such as *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes and J. Palacio's *Wonder* and *We're All Wonders*—facilitate this kind of parent-child sharing of experiences.

Read Brightly's website articles "5 Books That Teach Kids What It Means to Be a Kind Person"¹ and "Children's Books That Show Kids the Goodness in the World."² Books that show the many inspiring ways people do good for others give us an opening for

1. <https://www.readbrightly.com/books-that-teach-kids-to-be-kind-people/>

2. <https://www.readbrightly.com/childrens-books-show-kids-goodness-world/>

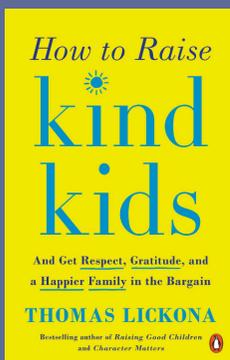
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talking with our kids about how we each can make a positive difference in the world, especially through kindness. ●

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How can we raise kids with courage, respect, self-control, and gratitude? Check out Dr. Tom Lickona's latest book, *How to Raise Kind Kids*. Dr. Lickona shares concrete examples from his work and clear tips that can be used to bring peace, respect, and good relationships to your home or classroom.

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