

nurturing compassion

Kids can care

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

A human being is part of the . . . universe. Our task [is that of] widening the circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature . . .
 Albert Einstein

Scene #1:

Alison, aged two and half, is patting Tommy's back. When Tommy fell off his tricycle, Alison abandoned her sand play and went to him. Their teacher invites Alison to help tend to Tommy's bumped knee.

Scene #2:

Following a presentation by Children's Corner, an organization that provides clothing and assistance to needy families, Bobby follows the speaker into the hall and tugs off his t-shirt, "Please give this to a poor child," he says. Bobby is three years old.

Scene #3:

A pre-K class composed a poem with their teacher, which she entered into a local contest. The poem won and the children received a \$150 reward. They agreed to buy a \$30 marble run with the money, but that left \$120 unspent. "We can give it to the food bank," said one little girl, a place the children visited regularly. The others unanimously agreed.

– Solution –

Three themes

These stories demonstrate remarkable caring, that special caring rooted in compassion. Simply defined, compassion is the desire to alleviate another's suffering.

The stories also remind us of three important things. The first, demonstrated by the little girl comforting a classmate, is aptitude — we are naturally wired to feel empathy for others. The little boy's generous offer of his t-shirt, reminds us that children also have the capacity to transform empathy into action. And the final example, rooted in the experience of the children's food bank visits, reinforces creativity — how modeling and practice become internalized and transformed into creative action.

Compassion: Seeds and roots

Compassion requires empathy, a necessity for relating to the suffering of others. But, before we can relate to other's feelings, we need to recognize our own. This need for self-awareness underscores the fact that compassion grows from the inside out. And for something to grow, seeds must be planted and take root.

Aptitude: Natural empathy

Empathy is tied to development and requires the ability to understand the world beyond oneself. For the first year and a half of life, children under-



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stand the world only as it relates to them. If they are hungry, hot, soiled, or in pain, they cry; and, depending upon the responses they get, they learn how to respond. This innate aptitude to replicate behaviors is wired into our brains through 'mirror neurons', which predispose us to repeat what we see and experience.

Eventually, children learn that there are others out there. And, surprise — those others can experience pain (when I poke her she cries); fear (we both scream when the door slams); or hunger (I can't have all the cookies for myself). As young children navigate this new world of 'others', there are many opportunities to encourage empathy.

"Mary is sad. She is crying. It hurt her when you hit her with the sand funnel." Such experiences, repeated over and over again, usher in empathy. As the needs and emotions of others are named and explained, and children are invited to respond in the caring ways they've experienced, empathy grows.

Capacity: Compassionate action

When something sad or troubling happens, we feel better if we are able to help in some way. The story of the child offering his t-shirt demonstrated this natural capacity to help. His t-shirt could keep a child warm. He got that — and acted with compassion by putting another's needs ahead of his own.

Children are very good at picking up on the emotional climate of those around them, but not so great at interpreting emotions or understanding their own. However, if we give children meaningful ways to help others, their capacity for compassionate action blossoms.

When a tsunami inundated Southeast Asia, children as well as adults were

exposed to the suffering taking place. To give children a means to contribute in a situation that was remote for them, but still somehow very present, one preschool offered a unique opportunity. The teachers brought in books about water buffalo, animals common to the flooded regions, and explained that even animals were affected by the tsunami. Children learned the importance of water buffalo in the lives of these families. From that starting point, the classes joined together for a 'Water Buffalo Breakfast.'

The children ground coffee beans (with a hand-cranked grinder), squeezed oranges into fresh juice, and shook cream to make butter. The classroom soon resembled a café, with the children's art as placemats and along the walls. Parents were invited to the breakfast, which the children served and ate with them. The adults made contributions for their breakfasts, and the money raised was sent to an organization that helped replace animals lost in the floods.

I love this example, because it takes a situation that is repeated in many different variations, as world events affect us all, and gives very young children a way to make a bad situation better. This both educates children about the world and nurtures their capacity for compassion, helping them to see themselves as capable of alleviating suffering.

Creativity: Internalized learning

From the very beginning, when early lessons about sharing toys, treats, or play equipment are being modeled and taught, we are also planting important seeds of empathy and compassion. But for those seeds to really flourish, other experiences are needed.

A particularly honest little boy held up a can of baked beans at his show-and-tell circle during a food drive, and said, "This is the kind we don't like." For that

child, the connection to suffering and hunger was absent.

In the earlier example, the children's repeated visit to a nearby food bank, carrying donated cans and boxes of food, had broadened their experience. They saw the shelves of food to be given away, met the workers at the facility, and saw the quantities of food needed. This deeper level of experience fueled the generosity demonstrated with the donation of their prize money.

Have you ever felt dismay after a birthday party or holiday celebration when your child looks up from a pile of unwrapped gifts to ask, "Is that all?" The tempting response is to insist children say 'thank-you' and demand their appreciation. But if we really want to instill appreciation for what they have, we need to help children learn to give some of it away.

Nowruz, the Iranian New Year's celebration, involves clearing out possessions and giving them to those in need. From Christianity and Judaism, to Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Muslim faith, similar expectations are associated with many celebrations. Such experiences blend giving into living. When we add real life experiences, creativity transforms them into compassionate responses.

From the inside out

Compassion's seeds can be planted and nurtured in many ways:

- When we give a tired child a hug, he experiences empathy and his natural aptitude for this response is nurtured.
- When we acknowledge a child's kindness to another, we encourage his capacity for compassionate action.
- With a bit of thought and preparation, we can provide experiences that feed creativity and lead to compassionate responses.

- If we tend the fragile garden of a child's heart — compassion will unfurl from her heart to her hands — growing from the inside out, a lifetime harvest of many, tiny seeds.

Resources

Me to We, Craig and Marc Kielburger. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006. This book offers an inspiring, easy-to-read invitation to see ourselves in relation to others. It is appropriate for middle school through adult readers.

Freethechildren.com. This is a network of children helping children, begun by Craig Kielburger, (*Me to We* author) while he was still in grade school.

Kidscare.org. This site describes itself as, "Dedicated to developing compassion and inspiring a spirit of volunteering in children." Activities, ideas, and connections are offered.

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word 'snapshot' of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues

To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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