

14 Little Ways to Encourage Kindness

These simple ideas teach your children to be nice, generous people, one good deed at a time.

By Kristine Breese from *Parents Magazine* (October 2007)

Happy to Help

Great thinkers from Martin Luther King Jr. to the Dalai Lama to my daughter, Addison, all have had something to say about the importance of helping others. The civil-rights leader stated, "Life's most persistent and nagging question is 'What are you doing for others?'" The soft-spoken spiritual leader called doing good deeds "our prime purpose." And my 12-year-old put it this way: "Helping feels good because it's nice for the other person and for you."

Smart words. And as it turns out, kids are actually hardwired to be considerate and kind. "The desire to help is innate," says David Schonfeld, MD, director of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. And their sense of doing good develops as they grow. "At first, children like to help others because it helps them get what they want. Next, they do so because they get praise. Finally, they begin to anticipate the needs of others, and it becomes intrinsically rewarding to do nice things for people in their lives."

Bottom line: Kids want to help. And as parents, it's our job to nurture and guide a child's natural inclination to pitch in so it becomes a lifelong habit. "It's important to be a good role model -- children learn to be helpful from watching you," says Dr. Schonfeld. Try out a few of these simple ways to nudge your kid's helping gene.

Work as a Team

Make helping a family affair.

When a friend gets sick or a local family falls on hard times, grown-ups know what to do. They send flowers, bake casseroles, and pass the collection plate at church. Get your kids involved in these projects. Ask them what they'd like to do to help out, or suggest arranging the bouquet, layering noodles in the lasagna pan, or collecting cans of food. And when you drive over to deliver the gifts, take your kids along. They'll find out firsthand how good it feels to brighten someone's day. This is also a great opportunity to talk about being on the other side of the good-karma equation -- ask them whether they remember when someone did something nice for them and how it made them feel.

Share the wealth.

Teach your kids to see the abundance all around them and to think of people to share it with. When your rosebush explodes in bloom, invite your child to snip a few buds and take them to her teachers. Is his shelf overflowing with books? Suggest he donate a box to the library or a local family shelter. Package up leftover soup or cinnamon rolls, and take them to an elderly neighbor.

Hug a Tree

Teach respect for the earth.

Never litter. Even if something drops by mistake, make a point to pick it up. And if you see an old newspaper or a used coffee cup left on a park bench, throw it away. It feels good to take care of a mess you didn't make and weren't "supposed" to clean up.

Recycle.

How's this for a double whammy of doing good? Have your child collect and take empty cans and bottles to a recycling center that pays you for what you bring in, then drop the money you make into the donation jar at the supermarket checkout.

The Art of Pitching In

Assign chores.

Kids should understand that a certain amount of helping is requested and required "just because": just because they're members of the family, just because they live under the same roof, and just because it's the right thing to do. So show them where the cat food is and how to clear the dinner table and make their beds. And keep a chore chart to track and reward the completion of their tasks. Your kids will feel great pride in doing their share.

Teach teamwork.

How often have you hosted a playdate and been left with what looks like a scene from the movie *Twister*: dolls and their tiny clothes strewn everywhere, glue and glitter splattered on tables and rugs, juice cups and crumbs all over? When your child is a guest, make sure she helps clean up before she climbs into the minivan. If the host insists it's not necessary, say, "Let us pick up three things and then we'll be on our way." Putting away a few army men or Legos is a great way to practice the art of pitching in.

Perform small acts of kindness.

I have a friend who'd had breast cancer. I asked her, "What was the nicest thing anyone did for you when you were sick?" She told me that the mother of one of her daughter's friends packed lunches for her little girl for the entire month after the surgery. This simple gesture meant my friend could take the time to recuperate minus one daily chore. Plus, her daughter enjoyed some new tasty treats in her lunch box.

Look on the Bright Side

Give your kids rose-colored glasses.

Sometimes, it can seem as if bad news is all around us. Point out to your kids the good things that are happening and the good people who are helping others. Cut out newspaper articles about student groups who volunteered to build homes or collect clothes after a natural disaster. This makes your kids feel better about the world they live in and also gets them thinking creatively about ways they can make a difference.

Don't criticize their efforts.

Yes, you can get the wet towels off the floor faster, sort the laundry better, and pour the milk without spilling it, but if you take over (or critique too much) it leaves your little helpers feeling inept, unskilled -- and less likely to offer their services again. If you're impatient, you can turn a teachable moment into a missed opportunity. "Kids want to help cook dinner, wash the car, and do the dishes, and, sure, they'll do it slowly and imperfectly at first," says Dr. Schonfeld. You're teaching them that they can make a difference at home. Just imagine how good they'll feel when they step out into the world.

Do Unto Others...

Lighten someone's load.

Send your child out to meet the mail carrier on the sidewalk before he or she has to climb your steps or walk up the driveway. Offer a fellow grocery shopper help to the car with her bags. Let someone with less stuff go ahead of you in line at the supermarket.

Cheer up a stranger (or a friend).

If you see that your neighbor's newspaper is always getting soaked by the sprinklers, toss it onto her porch. If the guy who drives your bus has been gone for a few days, ask him how he's feeling when he returns. Is a friend sad? Give her a hug. Teaching your kids to notice what's going on in the lives of folks in their own backyard fosters empathy and can inspire them to become keen helpers.

Do something that's above and beyond the call of duty.

If your neighbors have lost a pet, call and ask whether they've found their furry friend. If they haven't, you and your child can offer to hang up more signs and keep an eye out for their pal.

Give thanks.

Compliment a stranger on her great sweater, say "good morning" to a neighbor, and thank the pizza delivery guy. Sometimes a simple acknowledgment or expression of appreciation is all the boost someone needs to get through the day.

Be a good neighbor.

My family lives in an area that was built in the 1940s as a place where returning WWII veterans could buy a first home, settle down, and start a family. Today, many of the houses are still occupied by their original owner, typically an elderly widow. On our street, there are five such women, and a neat thing has happened. Without anyone's suggesting it, the immediate neighbors of each of these ladies have taken to rolling their garbage cans in and out of their garage and to the curb and back every Monday (trash day on our street). We recently joined the ranks of the Croydon Avenue trash-can brigade when the husband of our elderly neighbor passed away. The Monday morning after the funeral, Travis, my 10-year-old, said, "Maybe we should get Ann's cans too." And so now we do. There's probably a group that needs help or a problem to be solved in your own neighborhood. So the next time you see something awry, don't complain. Look at it as an opportunity to get involved. Inspire your kids to find ways to make their corner of the world a brighter place.