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How to Raise Kids Who Care

4 Ways to Cultivate Empathy



How do you raise kids who care? Education professor William Damon says that one of the first and most important steps in raising moral children is to nurture their ability to feel empathy. According to Damon, “Empathy toward those in distress” is one of the “elements of a universal morality.”

The good news for parents is that empathy arises naturally in children at an early age and is easily nurtured through fun family activities such as [watching movies together](https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/arts-and-faith/film/movies-that-are-fun-to-watch-as-a-family) (<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/arts-and-faith/film/movies-that-are-fun-to-watch-as-a-family>). You don’t have to go looking for special events or situations to make this happen. A child receives the best moral education during normal daily situations when adults are actively engaged in that child’s life. Here are a few ordinary opportunities where you might cultivate empathy in your children:

1. Read stories and watch movies together.

Occasionally stop and ask your child, “How do you think this character feels?” There is no right answer. The point is to encourage empathetic feelings and reflection. Such questioning will give children opportunities to hone their ability to sense the feelings of others. It will also help them to base their future actions on compassion rather than self-centeredness.

2. Allow your child to fully declare their feelings when they’re having a difficult time with a sibling or friend.

Ask your child if they can also express what the other person might be feeling and why. The point of this exercise is not to put down or dismiss your child’s feelings but to widen his or her sense of all that is truly going on in the situation.

3. Create a safe climate for your child to take responsibility for his or her actions—both good and bad.

Professor Damon says, “There is no more effective facilitator of moral development than fostering children’s willingness to take responsibility for good and bad deeds.” You can encourage this willingness by responding calmly and evenly when your child admits to misdeeds. Your child can still experience the consequences of those misdeeds, including your measured expression of disappointment or anger. Emotional tirades will just suppress your child’s willingness to admit mistakes.

4. Be a good listener.

Take the time for open conversation with your children and answer their questions honestly, this provides endless opportunities to talk about caring and respecting for others. Simply lead by example and you’ll accomplish a lot.

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