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## **Kindness Counts**

**Notice — and encourage — your child's random acts of kindness.**

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A young mother strokes her screaming infant's head as her family waits on what seems to be the slowest restaurant service in the world. A harried waitress approaches the table with a smile and stoops to pick up the napkin that 4-year-old Samuel has tossed to the floor for the umpteenth time. Samuel sits up tall, kisses his crying sister on the head, and announces, "Mommy wants her food! Now!"

When you read the paragraph above, what stood out in your mind? Did you notice how the mother offered comfort to her infant, or did you focus on the screaming? Did you notice the waitress offering the gift of a smile while picking up the napkin, or did you focus on Samuel's antics?

If you focused more on the children's actions, you're not alone. When it comes to children, our attention is often drawn more to the crying baby, the grabbing preschooler, or the siblings who obstinately sit on top of each other. We want to teach our children kindness, yet the unkind acts often stand out more for us. That's too bad because what we focus on is what we value, and that, in turn, leads to more of a similar kind of behavior.

All children misbehave or act up from time to time. But they are also natural-born contributors to the welfare of others at all ages. Think about it — a baby smiles at an elderly man in the store, bringing them both joy. A preschooler tucks a crayon in his pocket so he and a friend can draw later. An 8 year old scoots over on the couch to make room for his sister. Children create moments of kindness, helpfulness and compassion all around us.

The key to raising children who actively demonstrate kindness, helpfulness and compassion is to train our minds to notice those acts when they occur. Noticing children's kindness, and praising it, not only encourages more of that kind of behavior, it has other benefits as well. It expands a child's consciousness, fosters the rooting of a positive value system, and primes the brain for future success in school, society, and life.

### **What Kindness Looks Like**

Noticing is a specific skill that is often confused with judging. A common response to seeing a child being helpful is to say, "Good job" or "Thank you." Looking more closely, however, you can see how these kinds of phrases are judgments about a child's behavior, not a "noticing" of the behavior itself.

Cameron helps his sister climb into the car seat. Mom responds, "Thank you, darling." The implied message from Mom is that Cameron has done the action for her, not for his sister. Marissa taps her friend's shoulder in the classroom, encouraging her to focus on the teacher. The teacher comments, "Good job, Marissa." The teacher's implication is that Marissa has measured up to his standards. Noticing, on the other hand, requires a description of the child's action.

For children to develop kindness, they must know what it looks like, feels like, and sounds like. It must be labeled and described as it occurs, just as you label objects for a baby who is learning to speak: "Spoon. Mommy has a spoon. Here's your spoon." The following phrases will help you notice and point out kind and helpful acts in your children. Adjust your language to the developmental stage of your child.

**Under 3 years old:** "You picked up your toy. That was helpful." Notice how the kind action — picking up the toy — is described for the child. The praise is also kept brief so as to be easily grasped.

**4 years and older:** "Cameron, you held your sister's arm so she could crawl into her car seat and ride safely. That was helpful." Here again, the action of the kindness is described, but an additional element is added — a description of how the action contributes to another person: "... so she could crawl into her car seat and ride safely." The teacher in the previous section might have praised Marissa's action similarly: "Marissa, you tapped your friend's shoulder so she knew it was time to listen to the story. That was helpful."

Can you feel the difference between the phrases above and the casual, "Good job?" Noticing describes the action, rather than judging it. By noticing helpful and kind acts in this way, we can achieve many developmental goals that lead our children to embrace our most cherished values.

- **Describing children's actions** helps children become conscious of what they are doing in the moment: "You picked up the toys"; "You said thank you"; "You set the table." This consciousness stimulates the development of the higher centers of the brain that are essential for problem solving.

- **Stating how the action contributes to the welfare of others** helps older children understand that they make a positive difference in the lives of others: "You picked up the toys so no one would fall"; "You said thank you so your friends knew you cared"; "You set the table, so we'd have the utensils needed to eat."
- **Adding a descriptive tag** gives a name to these actions: "That was thoughtful"; "That was kind"; "That was helpful." When we do this, we teach our children exactly what these qualities look like, feel like, and sound like.

### The Power of Noticing

It is vital that we use moments of kindness to help children learn how their behavior contributes to the welfare of others. Historically, we've done this very well with negative behaviors. We clearly specify what the child did wrong: "You have whined all week long: 'It's too hot,' 'The lines are too long.'" We share how it affects everyone: "You have made the vacation miserable for the entire family!" Then we add a tag line to drive it all home: "Are you happy now?" Yet, we toss off, "Thank you" or "Good job" when children are helpful.

The long-term impact of focusing on children's negative behavior and how it affects others is apparent. It is one reason many of us are so clear about our own faults, undervalue our personal worth at times and underestimate our value to others.

I give many presentations throughout the year to large audiences. Ninety-nine percent of their evaluations of my presentation are outstanding, but one or two attendees sometimes write a negative comment. I inevitably leave these sessions invalidating the positive comments and focus on the two negative ones. That is because like many of us, I have been systematically taught that my ineptness creates distress for others, and that my gifts simply benefit me. We devalue our strengths and helpfulness to others and punish ourselves internally over perceived mistakes.

By reversing this very powerful lesson, we can concretely teach the next generation the abstract values like kindness, helpfulness and caring. These values are heralded by all major religions and spiritual traditions as essential skills that make a difference in the lives of others. Imagine a child growing up with internal guidance that says, "You are valuable, you make a difference, your gifts benefit others." Noticing kind acts has the power to do just that.

Recent research shows that kindness counts in more ways than the obvious growth of morality. We are not meant to be completely independent nor dependent, but to give and receive in mutual interdependence. We all seek, on some level, to make a difference and live a life of purpose. As we give to others, we strengthen ourselves. As we receive from others, we allow them to grow. Every kind act, every contribution that we make, bathes our cells in a biochemical mixture of life-enhancing nutrients. The point is, being of service it is a biological necessity that is required for optimal brain development. Random acts of kindness foster the development of the higher centers of our brain. From these higher centers, our children grow to be readers, writers, scientists, artists and mathematicians, exploring the wonders of the world.

Try to consciously focus on the loving acts you see today. When your child learned to say "spoon," you smiled because your repetition and actions paid off. When your child grows to be a compassionate human being, the whole world will smile with you.