



Developing Soft Skills for Our Children – by Raising Empathetic Children.

As parents, most of us are anxious about what we can do to ensure our children will have bright futures.

Often we channel our efforts heavily on activities that are built for our children's academic and personal successes. While academic success, without doubt, will help to give our children more chance for success in the future, we have seen in the past decade where soft skills required in team

work, are becoming increasingly important as a factor for success.

The traditionally held prestigious jobs such as doctors, architects and engineers are increasingly becoming team based. Further, we have seen academic strength has not been regarded as highly as it was in the past generation. For example, Google has dropped the need for a college degree as the prerequisites for employment application (Glassdoor 2018).

Amazon's Jeff Bezos stressed that soft skills such as being confident, humble, and having the ability to communicate concepts well are key traits that his



company looks for in hiring (Business Insider 2018). Some of the most successful companies today are platforms for connecting people - Facebook and Wechat are cases in point.

There is an extensive list for what are considered soft skills – with communication, listening, and team building skills being some of the most mentioned qualities.

However, how do we help our children develop these skills?

We may help them by focusing on one attribute - empathy. Empathy is the ability to share and understand the emotions of others (Molenberghs

2017). Empathy is the root for allowing our children to feel and listen to others. Having this quality can also lead to a better team vibe and allow our children to be more reliable team players.

In this article, I wish to briefly share my views on children's natural state of being self-centered, to introduce the importance of parents as role models, and, using my experience with my 4-year-old son, to recommend some activities that could help our children to develop empathy towards others.



1. Born Self-Centered?

Children have been said to be blank slates, and for Chinese, an acceptable saying is that children are like pieces of 'white paper', that their future can be 'molded' by what they experience. Although children are undoubtedly influenced by the upbringing of their parents and their environment, we often find children show tendencies of not caring and not being cooperative.

DeMause (1998) described for centuries, a popular Western belief that children were born with devils in them, thus required beating to help drive the devil out. In the East, for millenniums,

spanking was very common to stop children from their uncaring behaviours.

To say children are 'devilish' is a bit exaggerated, but they are indeed self-centered. Soft skills do not come naturally like learning to walk and to speak, but are to be influenced and experienced.

2. Nurturing Empathy for Children

Children are naturally self-centered, and thinking of how others feel does not come naturally to them. So how do we influence our children so they can be more empathetic to others?



I like to use my experience as a father of a 4-year old and share my experience of what activities seem to work and what don't.

First of all, parents are our children's natural role models. We can show our children that we care about how others feel. When we show empathy towards others, our children will notice and most likely will follow or imitate our actions and emotions. With time, our children can learn to resonate how others feel and hopefully allow them to connect and cooperate with others easier.

Further, being empathetic does not necessary mean feeling bad to those who are less

fortunate. We could show empathy towards others' achievements, others' joy, and many other emotions.

A. Teach Them Words to Express Feelings

Teaching children more words to express their emotions is like giving our children building blocks to understand how others feel. When our children are able to differentiate different kinds of feelings, they are more likely able to empathize with others. There are subtle differences between sadness and grief, being happy and being hopeful, being determined and being arrogant,



being angry and frustrated, and so forth. The more we try to discuss with and explain to our children about the subtleties, the more likely our children will be able to grasp others' feelings. This I feel is the number one task to equip our children with better soft skills.

B. Have Pets at Home

I found showing my son that my care and feelings for the animals have much impact on his views towards animals in general. I kiss and hug my cats at home and care for the strays (for instance, helped strays to find homes). I sense that seeing his

parent caring for animals has fostered my son's positive feeling towards animals. He would explain to me whether the animals we saw were happy, content, scared, annoyed, and so forth. He seems to be able to empathize with them. He actually is highly empathetic to animals in general, that he refuses to eat meat. No one in his immediate family is vegetarian, and I believe having a positive experience with pets has reinforced his strong emotion towards animals.

Being empathetic to animals is not trivial. It means a lot to the improvement of our humanities. Recent movements in animal



rights and 'no cruelty' products are cases in point.

C. Respect Our Helpers

I feel this is very important to let our children know we are grateful for the help we get from our helpers. Showing our children that parents and helpers work as a team and showing our children that our helper is an authority figure are important in developing our children's empathetic understanding. As our helper is usually the only non-blood relative caregiver our child will interact with, it would be our child's first chance to feel and resonate with people of a

different culture, language, race, and worldview for examples.

D. Reward Empathetic Behaviors

Rewarding our children on good empathetic responses is recommended. It could be a simple acknowledgment saying "I am proud of you for being so supportive to help someone" . We could give our children thank you notes for caring for the family pet. Or even a pat on the back for showing understanding to him after he said he felt the pain that others suffer. For team working environment, we could gift our child for behaviours that help the



team instead of only rewarding the winner.

In the above, I have mentioned a few suggestions that I feel can help build the empathetic foundation for our children. On the other hand, I would like to suggest activities that do not seem to have moved my 4-year-old son.

I. Sponsor an Overseas Child in Need

I thought sponsoring a child in need and telling my child how poor others are would help to provoke my son's feeling towards those whom he does not see or relate to. Maybe the timing

is not right, my son seems not moved much by hearing how the children of poorer countries live. I believe being not able to see the child in his or her environment of the sponsored country has less emotional impact on my son comparing with more intimate relationships such as that between him and his helper.

II. Joining Charity Events

It's similar to the responses to what I got from telling my son about the girl we sponsor. My son seems not to be able to connect the charity volunteering events he did to the causes of the charity organizations. For instance, he



joined a flag-selling event for Po Leung Kuk. During the time he was helping to get donations for the organization, he only cared about asking people to put donations into the bag and did not seem to care about the cause of the charity organization he was helping. For him, it seems it doesn't matter that the money was for an animal shelter, a Christian society, or Red Cross; he merely enjoyed asking passerby to put money in his bag.

Reflection:

I hope the sharing above resonates with you. Nurturing our children to be empathetic, the

ability to feel and understand the emotions of the others, can be a good time investment to prepare our children for a better chance to succeed in the increasing interconnected world where the ability to cooperate and share is paramount. Empathy is the foundation for further developing our child's listening, communication, sensitivity, as well as other soft skills.

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