

## Tips on Raising Caring Children

What does it take to raise a compassionate, moral child? asks Adam Grant (Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania) in this *New York Times* article. Researchers have found that worldwide, this is parents' number one priority – instilling caring is more important to them than their children's achievement. But how much difference do parents make in this area? Are some children born good-natured and others mean-spirited? Studies of twins suggest that between one-quarter and one-half of people's propensity to be kind is inherited – which means that parents and the environment account for up to three-quarters. Drawing on the psychological research, Grant has these suggestions for adults working with children:

- *Praise is more effective than rewards.* If we want to reinforce caring, “Rewards run the risk of leading children to be kind only when a carrot is offered, whereas praise communicates that sharing is intrinsically worthwhile for its own sake,” says Grant.

- *With children around 8 years old, praise character, not actions.* Say, for example, “You’re a very nice and helpful person,” which leads children to internalize being helpful as part of their identity. However, this approach doesn’t work with younger children, who haven’t formed a stable sense of self, and with children 10 and older, there’s no difference in whether they’re praised for character or actions.

- *Nouns work better than verbs.* It’s better to encourage a child to “be a helper” than “to help,” and it’s better to say, “Please don’t be a cheater” than “Please don’t cheat.” Grant explains: “When our actions become a reflection of our character, we lean more heavily toward the moral and generous choices. Over time it can become part of us.”

- *With bad behavior, evoke guilt, not shame.* “Shame is the feeling that I am a bad person, whereas guilt is the feeling that I have done a bad thing,” says Grant. “Shame is a negative judgment about the core self, which is devastating; shame makes children feel small and worthless, and they respond either by lashing out at the target or escaping the situation altogether. In contrast, guilt is a negative judgment about an action, which can be repaired by good behavior. When children feel guilt, they tend to experience remorse and regret, empathize with the person they have harmed, and aim to make it right.” When parents get angry, withdraw their love, and threaten punishments, children feel shame and believe they’re bad people. Some parents are so worried about this dynamic that they fail to discipline their children – which can get in the way of moral development.

- *With bad behavior, say you’re disappointed.* “[E]xpressing disappointment, explaining why the behavior was wrong, how it affected others, and how they can rectify the situation,” says Grant, “enables children to develop standards for judging their actions, feelings of empathy and responsibility for others, and a sense of moral identity, which are conducive to becoming a helpful person. The beauty of expressing disappointment is that it communicates disapproval of the bad behavior, coupled with high expectations and the potential for improvement: ‘You’re a good person, even if you did a bad thing, and I know you can do better.’”

- *Model caring and generous behavior.* Studies have shown that children pay more attention to what adults *do* than what they *preach*. “Children learn generosity not by listening to what their role models say, but by observing what they do,” says Grant. There’s an interesting contrast between these findings and Carol Dweck’s research and advocacy on praising children for working hard and being strategic rather than for being “smart” – praising actions rather than innate qualities. It seems there is a difference between the way researchers think about the development of moral character versus intelligence.

“Raising a Moral Child” by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, April 13, 2014