

Generous Pint-Sized Givers

Teaching Kids How to Care and Share

by Jennifer Jacobson

Among a parent's greatest rewards is seeing their children grow up to be productive, contributing members of society, including knowing how to give back and enrich the communities in which they live. Children can start participating in the giving process as toddlers. Having them observe regular charitable acts can make a strong impression and catalyze later independent initiatives.

Learning how to give and developing the associated skill set is a lifelong journey. Giving becomes a way of life—of looking at the world and determining how to help the causes they feel passionate about. Here's how to take those crucial first steps.

Ask kids how they'd like to help. If giving to a cause is new to the household, explain that the family has many opportunities. Then engage children in a conversation about the general areas they may feel strongly about supporting—perhaps individuals or families in need, animals or wildlife habitat—and start a list of those that the family is interested in.

Next, start researching related local organizations, facilities and institutions, and matching them to the topics on the list. Ideas may include food kitchens, pet shelters and animal

rescues, nature parks, senior citizens' residences, camps for low-income or physically or mentally challenged children, zoos, museums, aquariums and local libraries.

Make a game plan. Get creative about how to actually help the selected causes. Talk it through together, map out activities—like visiting, donating funds or materials or participating in fundraising efforts—and post the results somewhere at home that is highly visible. “Gamify” it to some degree with tasks that turn into goals that turn into accomplishments that result in chits.

Quick tasks can make a big difference. Clear the clutter. Every six to 12 months, launch an all-family household closet cleaning day that includes the toy chest and maybe the garage. Add non-perishable healthy food items they've picked out while grocery shopping.

Make a “donate box” positioned where kids can add to it and deliver the donations often, even if it's small.

Find ways to raise money for donations. Organize a family or neighborhood yard sale or organic bake sale that involves kids at all stages of the project, and give all or a portion of the proceeds to a selected charity.

Associate getting with giving. For birthdays and holidays, include a



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handwritten “certificate of giving” that specifies the amount of money available for them to gift to their favorite charity. Take the child to the charity site to make the monetary donation in person, if possible. For non-local organizations, write a check and have the child include a letter with their thoughts and mail it.

Volunteer to do community service. Public gardens need weeding, historic buildings need painting and food banks need hands. Find goodwill tasks that are age-appropriate and engaging.

Grow the mindset. Tell real-life stories about kids or groups of kids that have found creative ways to give back. Encourage empathy by sharing appropriate stories of struggle. Ask kids, “How would you want people to help you in this situation?” Explain the action the family is taking and the resulting benefit to the recipient.

The conversation might be, “We don’t need to store all this stuff when someone else could really use it.” Or, “I bet there is a kid out there who would really like playing with this toy. I know you used to love it, but how about if you pass it along to someone else so they can enjoy it as much as you have?” Keep the focus on the people in need and your child’s ability to share an experience through an item. Establishing an impermanent connection to material things can help kids understand the importance of nurturing relationships over acquiring goods.

Develop a language of giving in the household by creating opportunities to incorporate it into regular conversation. Appropriate comments could share concepts such as seeing ourselves as stewards of the planet and the things we think we own; it’s our duty to help those in need when we have abundance; and if there is ever a time when we are without, we hope that others will think of us and help us.

Teaching children how their thoughts, words and actions impact those around them is a lesson that bears repeating.

Jennifer Jacobson lives in Seattle and has served on the boards of several influential nonprofits and other organizations focused on conservation, education and community.

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