



# Raising Caring, Respectful, Ethical Children



Research in human development clearly shows that the seeds of empathy, caring, and compassion are present from early in life, but that to become caring, ethical people, children need adults to help them at every stage of childhood to nurture these seeds into full development.

We should work to cultivate children’s concern for others because it’s fundamentally the *right* thing to do, and also because when children can empathize with and take responsibility for others, they’re likely to be happier and more successful. They’ll have better relationships their entire lives, and strong relationships are a key ingredient of happiness. In today’s workplace, success often depends on collaborating effectively with others, and children who are empathic and socially aware are also better collaborators.

Below are a set of guideposts to raising caring, respectful, and ethical children, along with tips for putting them into action. These guideposts are supported by many studies and by the work that our various organizations have conducted over several decades with families across America.

## 1. Work to develop caring, loving relationships with your kids

**Why?** Children learn caring and respect when they are treated that way. When our children feel loved, they also become attached to us. That attachment makes them more receptive to our values and teaching.

**How?** Loving our children takes many forms, such as tending to their physical and emotional needs, providing a stable and secure family environment, showing affection, respecting their individual personalities, taking a genuine interest in their lives, talking about things that matter, and affirming their efforts and achievements.



### Try this

- 1. Regular time together.** Plan regular, emotionally intimate time with your children. Some parents and caretakers do this through nightly bedtime reading or other shared activity. Some build one-on-one time with their children into their weekly schedules rather than leaving it to chance. You might, for example, spend one Saturday afternoon a month with each of your children doing something you both enjoy.
- 2. Meaningful conversation.** Whenever you have time with your child, take turns asking each other questions that bring out your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Ask questions such as:
  - “What was the best part of your day? The hardest part?”

- “What did you accomplish today that you feel good about?”
- “What’s something nice someone did for you today? What’s something nice you did?”
- “What’s something you learned today—in school or outside of school?”

## 2. Be a strong moral role model and mentor

**Why?** Children learn ethical values and behaviors by watching our actions and the actions of other adults they respect. Children will listen to our teaching when we walk the talk.

**How?** Pay close attention to whether you are practicing honesty, fairness, and caring yourself and modeling skills like solving conflicts peacefully and managing anger and other difficult emotions effectively. But, nobody is perfect all the time. That is why it’s important for us, in fact, to model for children humility, self-awareness, and honesty by acknowledging and working on our mistakes and flaws. It’s also important for us to recognize what might be getting in the way of our own caring. Are we, for example, exhausted or stressed? Does our child push our buttons in a specific way that makes caring for her or him hard at times? And remember, children will only want to become like us if they trust and respect us. Adults can reflect on whether our children respect us and, if we think they don’t, consider why, and how we might repair the relationship.



### Try this

1. **Service.** Regularly engage in community service or model other ways of contributing to a community. Even better, consider doing this with your child.
2. **Honesty and humility.** Talk with your child when you make a mistake that affects them about why you think you made it, apologize for the mistake, and explain how you plan to avoid making the mistake next time.
3. **Check-in with others.** Reflect and consult with people you trust when you’re finding it hard to be caring or to model important ethical qualities like fairness.
4. **Take care of yourself.** Whether it’s spending time with a friend, going for a walk, praying or meditating, try to make time to relieve your stress both because it’s important for you and because it will enable you to be more attentive to and caring with others.

## 3. Make caring for others a priority and set high ethical expectations

**Why?** It’s very important that children hear from their parents and caretakers that caring about others is a top priority and that it is just as important as their own happiness. Even though most parents and caretakers say that their children being caring is a top priority, often children aren’t hearing that message.

**How?** A big part of prioritizing caring is holding children to high ethical expectations, such as honoring their commitments, doing the right thing even when it is hard, standing up for important principles of fairness and justice, and insisting that they're respectful, even if it makes them unhappy and even if their peers or others aren't behaving that way.



**Try this**

- 1. A clear message.** Consider the daily messages you send to children about the importance of caring. For example, instead of saying to children “The most important thing is that you're happy,” you might say “The most important thing is that you're *kind* and that you're happy.”
- 2. Prioritize caring when you talk with other key adults in your children's lives.** For example, ask teachers and coaches whether your children are good community members in addition to asking about their academic skills, grades, or performance.
- 3. Encourage kids to “work it out.”** Before letting your child quit a sports team, band, or a friendship, ask them to consider their obligations to the group or the friend, and encourage them to work out problems.

#### **4. Provide opportunities for children to practice caring and gratitude**

**Why?** Children need practice caring for others and being grateful—it's important for them to express appreciation for the many people who contribute to their lives. Studies show that people who engage in the habit of expressing gratitude are more likely to be helpful, generous, compassionate, and forgiving—and they're also more likely to be happy and healthy.

**How?** Learning to be grateful and caring is in certain respects like learning to play a sport or an instrument. Daily repetition—whether it's helping a friend with homework, pitching in around the house, having a classroom job, or routinely reflecting on what we appreciate about others—and increasing challenges make caring and gratitude second nature and develop children's caregiving capacities. Hold family meetings that give children practice helping to solve family problems such as squabbles between siblings, hassles getting off to school, and making meals more pleasant. Although as parents and caretakers we always need to stand firmly behind key values such as caring and fairness, we can make our home democratic in key respects, asking our children to express their views while they listen to ours. Involving children in making plans to improve family life teaches perspective-taking and problem-solving skills and gives them an authentic responsibility: becoming co-creators of a happy family.



**Try this**

- 1. Real responsibilities.** Expect children to routinely help, for example, with household chores and siblings, and only praise uncommon acts of kindness. When these kinds of routine actions are simply expected and not rewarded, they're more likely to become ingrained in every day actions.

- 2. Make caring and justice a focus.** Start conversations with children about the caring and uncaring acts they see in their daily lives or on television and about acts of justice and injustice they might witness or hear about in the news, such as a person who stood up for an important cause or an instance of sexism or racism. Ask children how they see these actions and explain why you think these actions are caring or uncaring, just or unjust.
- 3. Expressing thanks.** Consider making expressing gratitude a daily ritual at dinnertime, bedtime, in the car, or on the subway. Encourage children to express appreciation for family members, teachers, or others who contribute to their lives.

## 5. Expand your child's circle of concern

**Why?** Almost all children empathize with and care about a small circle of families and friends. Our challenge is help children learn to have empathy and care about someone outside that circle, such as a new child in class, someone who doesn't speak their language, the school custodian, or someone who lives in a distant country.

**How?** It is important that children learn to *zoom in*, listening closely and attending to those in their immediate circle, and to *zoom out*, taking in the big picture and considering the range of people they interact with every day. Children also need to consider how their decisions impact a community. Breaking a school rule, for example, can make it easier for others to break rules. Especially in our more global world, it's important, too, for children to develop concern for people who live in other cultures and communities.



### Try this

- 1. Children facing challenges.** Encourage children to consider the perspectives and feelings of those who may be vulnerable, such as a new child at school or a child experiencing some family trouble. Give children some simple ideas for taking action, like comforting a classmate who was teased or reaching out to a new student.
- 2. Zooming out.** Use newspaper or TV stories to start conversations with children about other people's hardships and challenges, or simply the different experiences of children in another country or community.
- 3. Listening.** Emphasize with your child the importance of really listening to others, especially those people who may seem unfamiliar and who may be harder to immediately understand.

## 6. Promote children's ability to be ethical thinkers and positive change-makers in their communities

**Why?** Children are naturally interested in ethical questions and grappling with these ethical questions can help them figure out, for example, what fairness is, what they owe others, and what to do when they have conflicting loyalties. Children are also often interested in taking leadership roles to improve their

communities. They want to be forces for good. Many of the most impressive programs to build caring and respect and to stop bullying and cruelty, for example, have been started by children and youth.

**How?** You can help children become ethical thinkers and leaders by listening to and helping them think through their own ethical dilemmas, such as, “Should I invite a new neighbor to my birthday party when my best friend doesn’t like her?” At the same time, you can provide opportunities for your children to fight injustice in their communities and to strengthen their communities in other ways.



#### Try this

- 1. Taking action.** Encourage children to take action against problems that affect them, such as cyberbullying or an unsafe street corner.
- 2. Joining up.** Provide opportunities for children to join causes, whether it’s reducing homelessness, supporting girls’ education in developing countries, calling attention to the plight of abused animals, or any area that is of interest to them.
- 3. Doing “with.”** Encourage children not just to “do for” others but to “do with” others, working with diverse groups of students to respond to community problems.
- 4. Thinking out loud with your child.** Start a conversation about ethical dilemmas that arise on TV shows or give children ethical dilemmas to grapple with at meal times or in other situations. What should they do when a schoolmate tells them bad things about another child? When they see someone cheating on a test or stealing? When they’ve done something wrong and are afraid to admit it to their parents or caretakers?

## 7. Help children develop self-control and manage feelings effectively

**Why?** Often the ability to care for others is overwhelmed by anger, shame, envy, or other negative feelings.

**How?** We can teach children that all feelings are ok, but some ways of dealing with them are not useful. Children need our help learning to cope with feelings in productive ways.



#### Try this

- 1. Identifying feelings.** Name for children their difficult feelings such as frustration, sadness, and anger and encourage them to talk to you about why they’re feeling that way.
- 2. 3 steps to self-control.** A simple way to help children to manage their feelings is to practice three easy steps together: stop, take a deep breath through the nose and exhale through the mouth, and count to five. Try it when your child is calm. Then, when you see her getting upset, remind her about the steps and do them together.

- 3. Resolving conflicts.** Practice with your child how to resolve conflicts. Consider a conflict you or your child witnessed or experienced that turned out badly, and role play different ways of responding. Try to achieve mutual understanding—listening to and paraphrasing each other’s feelings until both people feel understood. If your child observes you experiencing a difficult feeling and is concerned, talk to your child about how you are handling it.
- 4. Clear limits.** Use authority wisely to set clear boundaries. Explain how your limits are based on a reasonable and loving concern for your child’s welfare.

Raising a caring, respectful, ethical child is and always has been hard work. But it’s something all of us can do. And no work is more important or ultimately more rewarding.

The following have endorsed these tips:

Ashoka  
Career Training Concepts / H.E.A.R.–Helping Everyone Achieve Respect  
Cartoon Network  
Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, SUNY Cortland  
Character Education Partnership (CEP)  
Deborah Temkin  
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)  
Committee for Children  
Facing History and Ourselves  
Great Schools  
Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley  
HopeLab  
Jessica Berlinski, Adaptive Health Systems  
Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues  
Making Caring Common, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
Maurice J. Elias, Director, Social-Emotional Learning Lab, Rutgers University  
Michele Borba  
National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)  
National School Climate Center  
Peace First  
PREVNet  
The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation  
YMCA of the USA

For more information, please visit [makingcaringcommon.org](https://makingcaringcommon.org)