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How to Grow Caring Kids

[Adolescence](#) | [Attachment](#) | [Caring](#) | [Emotion](#) | [Preschoolers](#)

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When I think of all of the challenges my children will inherit – from global warming to growing inequality – wonder how I can best prepare them for what lies ahead. What will they need to help heal our world and successfully lead generations after them to care for it? I always seem to circle back to the same quality – caring. They will need to care enough so they are moved to understand how their life is connected to others despite geographical distance and differences in everyday living.

I am not alone in my desire to raise caring kids but the question remains how do we foster this caring quality? The capacity to care is based on instincts and emotions that exist in all of us. It is orchestrated by the limbic system or emotional center in the brain. The key to unlocking a child's caring capacity lies in activating this emotional system. Ignition is achieved through attachment, that is, an adult's actions to care for a child unlocks their capacity to care. It is through our relationship with them that they attach to people and things, feel taken care of by us, and will be moved to take care of others.

Without care taking, the instincts to attach to others and to care for them cannot be ignited. It is in through our relationship with our caretakers that we become fully human and humane.



How We Are Taking a Wrong Turn

In our efforts to grow caring kids there are a number of ways we are taking a wrong turn. Caring is instinctual and emotional in nature yet we have confused caring behaviour with that of having a caring spirit. While we can teach a child to give caring performances by saying sorry, please, thank you, I love you – this does not mean they have a caring spirit. When a child is commanded to act caring without questioning whether they truly feel the words they are saying, we detach their behaviour from the caring spirit that should drive it. It is ironic how kids will often pick up on these insincere actions and words with statements such as, “say sorry like you mean it!” Instead of commanding caring performances we can simply tell them when they have a ‘sorry’ in them, they should make amends accordingly. We may need to remind them and watch for their caring feelings to return, but encouraging them to make amends from a place of remorse is a sure way to growing a caring child.

The other challenge is that too often we reward children for acts of caring. When we do this we run the risk of turning their altruistic acts into selfish pursuits. A caring spirit is something that moves them in a particular direction regardless of rewards or praise that one might receive. When we praise a child for something that has come naturally to them, we diminish the spirit that drove them there. For example, my 5-year old daughter found a wallet while shopping in a store one day. As a lady came frantically down the aisle I told my daughter that this was likely the lady who had lost the wallet. My daughter moved to give it to her without words, seeing her distress. As the relief washed over the lady’s face she reached to give my daughter some money as a reward. I told her not to and to please keep her money. The lady insisted and tried to give my daughter some money but I repeated again for her not to do this. She look puzzled and upset so I told her that giving her purse back was just the right thing to do and my daughter did it because she cared. There was no need to reward her caring, it’s just what we do.



Cultivating the Capacity for Consideration

For our children to be able to understand another person’s point of view or experience, they will need to be capable of consideration. This means being able to imagine oneself ‘in another person’s shoes’ and to see the world ‘through their eyes.’ The capacity for consideration should develop spontaneously between the ages of 5 to 7 with good development. The precursor is having a solid understanding of who one is first of all. Before a child can consider the needs of others, they need to first make sense of their own needs. This is typically achieved in the first 6 years of life as they play, explore, and make sense of the world around them.

The capacity for consideration does not truly exist in a child until 5 to 7 as this is when the brain integrates and is capable of mixing of conflicting feelings and thoughts. For true consideration a child will need to be able to hold onto the conflict between their own needs, separate from the needs of others. They will need to be able to weigh

both sides and make a decision taking into account more than just their perspective.

I remember watching my 5 ½ year spontaneously bite her piece of bubblegum in half after seeing her sister in distress upon losing her gum. When I asked her why she had shared her bubblegum she looked at me as if I was silly and said, “because I care about her.” When we preserve a child’s caring spirit, their increasing

maturity should bring with it spontaneous acts of consideration.

The Role of Home in Cultivating Caring Children

Caring kids are the outcome of healthy growth and development. If we want to raise caring kids, the following five strategies can help us get there:

- Preserve their caring spirit by not rewarding caring behaviour and not commanding caring performances.
- Provide generously for their relational needs in order to open up their instincts and emotions to care for others.
- When they act in an uncaring way, use your relationship with them to help them understand why they feel as they do, using your warmth to melt their hardened heart and return their caring spirit.
- Help them understand who they are – their meanings, intentions, purpose, feelings, and desires – so they will be better equipped to understand another person's experiences when they are developed as a coherent self.
- Set them up to be in a position to care for others who are younger or more dependent on them such as a pet or sibling.

The roots of caring don't lie in reinforcement schedules to encourage kind behaviour but in possessing a caring spirit that moves you in this direction. Caring is an instinct we were meant to unlock in our kids and nurture as they grow. Becoming a caring being is more than just assuming a caring front, which will not hold up across time and place. If our children are truly going to be stewards of the environment and care about their actions on others, we will need to do better.

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Deborah is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute and in private practice working with parent of children and teens. She is the author of [Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers \(or anyone who acts like one\)](#). All work is based on the relational and developmental approach of Gordon Neufeld, PhD, please see www.macnamaradev.wpengine.com for more information or www.neufeldinstitute.org.

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