# Helping Children Become Kind and Compassionate Adults

## A Guide for Parents and Teachers

By Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D.

Well over 2,000 years ago, Socrates posed the question, "How can virtue be taught?" and we are still debating the answer today. The Smart Love approach is based both on clinical research pursued for over 40 years, and is supported by the latest studies in child development.

Tonight I will make a few remarks on the most effective way to instill "kindness" in children. If you are interested in learning more about the Smart Love approach, there is the book *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Regulating, and Enjoying Your Child,* and also a not-for-profit organization named Smart Love Family Services, whose web page is smartlovefamily.org.

Every parent wants to raise children who are kind and caring. It can be painful to hear from teachers that our child has taunted or pushed another child, and equally hard to see our child in tears because of another child's cruelty. Unfortunately, though, as I will try to describe, the best response to these situations is not the obvious one of making the offender apologize and toe the line. Rather we need to learn to model the kindness we wish to impart and to stop and determine what part of the "unkind" behavior might be age-appropriate. Before I get into details of the Smart Love approach, I want to emphasize that the greatest challenge to presenting this point of view is that the "proof of the pudding" is so far away in time. For example, when we talk about the best way to inspire compassion in our children, our goal is that they become compassionate caring adults, an endpoint that is two decades or more away. It was recently reported that nearly half of all college-age students "struggle with a

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mental health disorder," a percentage that would probably surprise the adults who knew this cohort as children. I can assure you that there are plenty of narcissistic, uncaring adults who appeared totally socialized at the ages of three or nine.

If you take only one thing away from our time together tonight, I hope it will be the notion that the long-term view is always the most important parenting perspective and that insisting that children exhibit adult levels of compassion and generosity is counterproductive and will be more likely to produce adults who struggle to be kind and giving. Rather than trying to make our children behave with the grace of adults, we need to expect only age-appropriate levels of compassion and to encourage these age-appropriate behaviors by modeling them, not by enforcing them. Already, I imagine some of you may be uncomfortable with the seeming paradox that we can engender adult compassion by relaxing our demands on our children, but I can assure you and, hopefully, convince you, that an informed, age-appropriate approach is the only way to grow adults who have a real appetite and capacity for helping others.

I should immediately add that we are not advocating any type of permissiveness. Children cannot be allowed to hurt others or themselves. But how we respond to our children's anti-social behaviors will make all the difference in the long term.

With that preamble, let's address the question, "How do we create a culture of kindness both in school and at home?"

First, and most important, children really do as we do, so we must model kindness, and not demand it. This sounds simple, until we find our patience giving out and ourselves sorely tempted to yell, "Do not talk to your sister like that! Go to your room!" The salient fact that will make us stop and think and, hopefully, adopt a different approach is that our children want to be just like us. If we yell, we should not be surprised in the future to hear our child yelling at his sister, "Don't do that – go away – I hate you." It doesn't make much sense to hold our children responsible when they imitate our irritable,

angry, or punitive responses. On the other hand, when we are able to respond with compassion and understanding, children will learn kindness.

You may be wondering why modeling kindness is so much more effective than "teaching" it. Probably our most important discovery, which has since been confirmed by other researchers in child development, is that the nature of the child's mind is that *young children cannot evaluate the quality of the care they get*. They assume that however they are treated is the way they should be treated and the way they should treat others. Children are born imitating – as Andrew Meltzoff showed, newborns will stick their tongues out when they see adults stick their tongues out.

Young children's inabilities to evaluate the quality of care they receive combined with their inborn drive to imitate is the reason modeling kindness is the only way to teach it. If we respond to our children with kindness and understanding, children will *want* to be just like us and they will grow up to treat themselves and others with the same compassion. Lectures and punishments are totally ineffective if the goal is that children will be caring when we are not around to enforce this behavior, because genuine kindness comes from within, not from without. Children experience lectures, anger, and punishments as unpleasant. Even though they may respond by bringing their behavior in line with our demands, the powerful wish to be just like us means that they will also develop unrecognized desires to makes themselves and others feel badly. Put differently, our goal is not to foster the semblance of kindness (paraphrasing Hamlet, to make children assume a virtue when they have it not) but to respond to our children so that eventually they will freely and happily choose to be compassionate and caring.

If a first grader has a friend over and they get into a fight over a toy and your child says to the other, "I'm never playing with you again," you can see that it is counterproductive to tell your child, "If you can't play nicely you can't have friends over!" How we choose to respond to anti-social behavior in our children is the model for how they will react when their friends, siblings, and those they will meet later in life don't do as they want. *If we threaten a child who is threatening another child with*

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"consequences," we have strengthened the behavior we want to change by modeling it. Much more effective would be to tell the child, "It can be hard when you both want the same toy – let's think of a way to make this work. Would you like to take turns with me setting the timer, would you like me to put the toy away until later, or is there something else you would like to do – how about making popcorn or going to the park." This approach shows the child that conflicts can be resolved amicably and without damaging the fabric of the relationship.

The short-term, but ultimately self-defeating, approach to anti-social behavior is to use whatever works (counting to three, disapproval, consequences, time-outs, and so on) to get the child to do what you want, or to stop doing what you don't want. When negative consequences, such as grounding or withholding allowances, are used to manage children's behavior, children will usually bring their behavior in line with parents' wishes. But what they learn is that might makes right, to treat themselves harshly when they make a mistake, and to feel angry and use aggression toward others who don't do what they want. So in the short term, strictures can make children "behave," but these measures sabotage our long term goal of nurturing adults who will freely choose be good to themselves and compassionate and tolerant toward others.

The Smart Love approach is to keep in mind that children are born loving us and will copy how we treat them. Therefore, **we do not want to model aggression as a form of conflict resolution, that is, of relationship problem solving.** Accordingly, I separate the punitive and manipulative components of discipline from the regulatory components and retain only the regulatory component. Children learn to govern themselves effectively and to care for others only by identifying with their parents' kindness and helpfulness toward them, and not by being made unhappy.

I replace discipline and permissiveness with an approach to managing children's behavior I call *Loving Regulation.* Loving regulation means helping children to make constructive choices in a context

of ongoing closeness with them. The child whose behavior is managed this way learns that it is possible to disagree with what another person is doing and still love and care for that person.

Loving regulation in the face of anti-social behavior is illustrated by the parent of a fourth grade girl we shall call Maria. Maria's mother was called by another parent who said Maria was tormenting the caller's child. Maria was making fun of the other child for having a facial tic and for being a little overweight. In an interested and neutral tone, the mother told Maria about the call and asked what was going on. Maria said that the other child was "irritating" her by laughing at her when she didn't know the answer to a math problem. The mother said she could understand that might be upsetting, and asked if Maria had told the other girl she didn't like it. Maria said no, that she had just tried to make her feel equally badly in return. Maria's mother asked her daughter if she could think of other ways to handle the situation that wouldn't make both girls feel so unhappy. After some thought, Maria suggested that she would offer not to say negative things if the other girl would do the same. Maria's mother said that was a great idea and suggested that Maria call the other girl. The call took place and the two girls stopped tormenting each other.

The point here is that Maria's mother did not lecture her daughter on the immorality of teasing others with handicaps, punish her, or force her to apologize. She first solicited her daughter's side of the story and then helped her child to come up with a better solution than the unkind behavior she had resorted to. Her response facilitated her daughter's ability to see the superiority of open relating in contrast to covert sniping. The mother helped her daughter achieve an age-appropriate degree of kindness rather than an enforced and superficial type of virtue.

In furthering our goal of creating a culture of kindness, in addition to modeling kindness, we need to understand that there is a developmental line of kind behavior so that different degrees of kindness are appropriate at different ages. The two-year-old who grabs another's toy is behaving age-appropriately, while the nine-year-old who grabs is not. A cornerstone of our approach is the need to

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understand children's minds and how they change. Smart Love is based on the most up-to-date understanding of the child's mind and emotions at every age and is the most effective way to foster genuine compassion.

It is crucial that parents and teachers avoid the temptation to try to make children conform to adult standards of compassion and generosity. The least effective way to foster kindness is to have expectations that are unreasonable because they are not age-appropriate. Put differently, the surest way to *prevent* children from growing into the adults we want them to be is to demand that they possess adult virtues while they are still children. Most importantly, we cannot use our children's behavior as a guide to whether we are parenting successfully. For example, just because we can make two-year-olds share does not mean that they will grow up to be altruistic. In reality, by demanding adult virtue from children who are in a normal phase of wanting to have what they want when they want it, we are making it more difficult for them to outgrow this phase and to develop the capacity for generosity. I have known more than one child who was forced to share as a two-year-old and who habitually stole as an eighth grader. By the same reasoning, two-year-old's inabilities to share are not a sign that they won't be generous adults.

They will outgrow their obsession with having what they want, particularly when friends become more important to them than things and they realize that sharing makes friendships go more smoothly. Allowing age-appropriate expressions of "unkindness," that is, letting children be children, is easier said than done because so many of us grew up believing that children are by nature manipulative, selfish, and untruthful and, therefore, *that they will take advantage of kindness*. In this view, criticisms, punishments, and "lessons" are required to make children adequately socialized. It can be difficult to shift gears and accept that children's controlling inborn motive is to experience positive relationship pleasure – first with their parents, and then with friends and teachers, and that when development goes

wrong it is because punishments and excessive expectations have taught children to want and need unhappiness.

When "unkindness" is the result of immaturity, it needs to be managed, not condemned. Handle incidents of unkindness calmly and with understanding, i.e. model responding to unkindness with kindness. If your preschooler butts in line for the slide or actually pushes another child out of line, all you have to do is to step in and say, "I think Tom was in line. Was it hard to take your turn?" When children feel understood rather than criticized, they remain open to constructive, relationship-oriented solutions. For example, you might say, "Come with me and I'll stand with you at the back of the line and I'll tell you a story while you wait." Teachers who know that three-year-olds find it hard to wait their turns might think of songs or other activities to occupy children in line.

One type of age-appropriate "unkindness" that is especially challenging for parents is rudeness toward them. If you tell your preschooler it's time for bed and she responds, "Shut up you stupid!" it is tempting to say, "You can't talk to me that way. Apologize or go to your room." But as I described earlier, this response enforces the appearance of politeness, but not the substance – it does not engender genuine concern for others. By getting angry at the child for expressing an age-appropriate resistance to bedtime in language she probably hears her peers use from time to time, you model and, thereby, strengthen her anti-social response. The parent using loving regulation would say, "You really felt angry when I said it was time for bed." Most preschoolers would agree with that conclusion, at which point you might add, "Next time, do you think you could just tell me you were feeling angry – I could understand that." The preschooler will experience the pleasure of feeling understood, which is much more gratifying than the "pleasure" of retaliation. In the process, she will have learned that it is preferable to feel close to the person who is giving her a loss (i.e., having to go to bed when she doesn't want to) rather than to make herself more unhappy by causing herself the second loss of trying to push the loved one away.

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So many of us were prohibited from being rude or expressing anger toward our own parents that it can be difficult to overcome our emotional attachment to the notion that children must be consistently respectful and to adopt a more developmental, facilitative stance. Rudeness can be even more difficult to respond to with understanding in older children, but the same principle applies: The goal is to help the child make sense of the reason for the rudeness rather than to focus on the form of the utterance. When your third-grader returns home from school, slams the refrigerator door, and announces, "You never buy any food I like. You don't even care about me," it can be hard to keep in mind that the best response is along the lines of, "Sounds like you had a hard day today – would you like to tell me about it?"

Another challenging type of age-appropriate behavior occurs when children make unkind remarks about others. The three-year-old may get in an elevator and say in a loud voice, "Mom! That man is really fat!" The eight-year-old may announce at dinner that she and her friends don't like Tom because he stutters. The temptation at those moments is to impose adult sensibilities and say to the three-year-old, "Shh, you'll hurt his feelings. Tell the man you are sorry." However, it doesn't occur to the three-year-old that she can hurt an adult's feelings and she is simply conveying an important observation to her parent. Because this comment is age-appropriate (in a year or two, the child will have matured enough to know not to make her observation in the man's presence), there is no reason for the parent to lecture the child about the impropriety of such comments or the hurt they can cause or, in fact, to make any comment at all. In fact, negative responses will dampen the child's natural curiosity and enthusiasm for making and sharing observations. The uncomfortable parent can always give the overweight person a sympathetic smile.

Analogously, we don't want to respond negatively to the eight-year-old with a remark like, "That's not nice – it's not Tom's fault that he stutters. Tom needs sympathy and understanding, not rejection." The eight-year-old is age-appropriately conveying her feelings to her parents in the privacy of her home. Rather than criticize her for rejecting a child for having a disability, parents can help her to

see beyond it. For example, a parent might say, "I'm sure it can be frustrating when someone stutters, but I'm wondering if there might be some things that Tom does that you do like?" The eight-year-old might respond, "Well, he is very good at math and he's nice about helping other kids." The parent can then ask why the stuttering seems so important that Tom's other qualities don't count. In answering this question, the eight-year-old will hopefully realize that her global dislike of Tom deserves reevaluation. In each case, we want to avoid making the child ashamed of an age-appropriate observation or feeling that would be unseemly in an adult. Shaming the child will not make her more caring toward overweight men or stutterers, but will have the opposite effect of inclining her to copy us and make others feel badly.

I have been discussing the process of engendering kindness in our own children, but parents often ask what to do when their child is on the receiving end of unkindness – both emotional and physical. Many families that embrace non-violence tell their children to "turn the other cheek." The problem is that at least until high school, children can misinterpret parents' strictures as telling them they are not allowed to defend themselves and that they are at the mercy of others' taunts and jabs. If children are to become pacifists as grown-ups, it should be a reflective choice they make for themselves. For now, you want the child to realize that in the face of bullying behavior, she has options. She can find someone less grumpy to play with; turn to an adult for help; tell the bully to leave her alone; and, even, defend herself and push back.

Additionally, you can help your child understand the psychology of the aggressor – not in order to justify the unpleasantness, but rather to help your child take the assault less personally and gain better strategies for responding. If she has been assailed by a child who is normally friendly, you can suggest that the other child was obviously having a bad day, and that it is unfortunate that the child had to take it out on your daughter. Perhaps your child might like to find someone more enjoyable to play with until her friend feels less out of sorts.

If the aggressor is a habitual bully, you can explain that bullies try to compensate for an inner type of unhappiness by making others unhappy, and that anything your child can do to deprive the bully of that satisfaction will make the bully more likely to pick on someone else. For example, if your child can ignore the bully's verbal provocations and simply turn away without showing any upset, the bully is likely to lose interest in picking on her.

## The Overly Aggressive or habitually Victimized Child

I would like to spend a short time talking about children who are habitually aggressive or who are regularly victims of aggression. These children are acting out of a learned (though unrecognized) inner unhappiness rather than expressing an age-appropriate immaturity. There are two kinds of happiness, primary and secondary. Primary happiness refers to a sense of inner well-being, secondary happiness refers to the enjoyment that comes from everyday activities such as reading, playing a musical instrument or a sport, talking with friends, and so on. You can find a detailed discussion of these two kinds of happiness in the book, *Smart Love*. I am just going to touch on them here as they relate to our topic. As I mentioned earlier, one of our most important discoveries is that babies are born loving their parents and feeling loved by them, and that, because of their immaturity, young children cannot evaluate the quality of the care they get. They believe that whatever responses they receive, whether or not this care accurately meets their needs, is ideal and they will learn to want more of it. This quality of newborns has been demonstrated in other animals. For example, Regina Sullivan has shown that up until nine days of age, rats that are given electric shock at the same time as they are exposed to the odor of their mother's milk develop a strong attraction to the milk odor, rather than an aversion, as you might think. That preference persisted into adulthood, long after the rats had matured enough to reject experiences that were paired with painful stimuli, and it could not be reversed later by classical conditioning.

The point is that if babies get care that doesn't meet their emotional needs, for example, when parents follow advice that tells them to leave babies to cry uncomforted, babies will believe that the unhappiness they feel is good because it is what their parents want for them. Like the rat pups, babies can learn to need and want unhappiness (which they confuse with happiness). As they grow older, their primary happiness will consist to some degree of unrecognized needs for unhappiness. They will need some of this familiar discomfort to maintain an inner equilibrium, and they will carry this learned need for unhappiness into adulthood, which is why I called the self-help book I wrote for adults *Addicted to Unhappiness*.

Many children who are overly aggressive or who provoke aggression in other children are actually struggling with inner unhappiness learned in early childhood. The dynamic at work here is that the negative attention the child receives has the meaning of being cared for. Children who have learned to need unhappiness, which they unknowingly mislabel as happiness, often seek out that unhappiness in their relationships with other children. The worst possible response is a punitive one, because punitive responses, such as withholding activities the child likes, are imitated by the child and, in this way, simply strengthen the part of the child that derives well-being from provoking negative responses.

The good news is that needs for unhappiness can be left behind, and that these children can be helped to reconnect with the optimism and wish for genuine pleasure that all babies bring into the world. If parents and teachers use loving regulation and respond firmly but with understanding, for example, by saying to the aggressive child, "I can see that you are having trouble playing with Mary right now. Come sit here by me and let's see if that helps," the child's inborn wishes for positive relationship pleasure will be strengthened. Moreover, parents and teachers should take every possible opportunity to give the child positive attention, so the child understands that she can be noticed for good behavior as well as bad behavior and has the chance to experience the superiority of positive responses. Sometimes the child who habitually and for long periods struggles with peer relationships needs professional help to get back

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on the road to enjoyable friendships. The important quality to look for in a professional is someone who understands that the angry or victimized child is not "bad," "manipulative," or "weak." The therapist who understands this child will not become angry or upset when the child is provocative in the therapeutic relationship, and, ultimately, will help the child to experience the happiness that comes from positive, unconflicted relating. As I have witnessed in over 40 years of working with children and supervising others who see children, over time children can develop the desire and ability to choose this positive happiness for themselves. Once children's appetites for conflict diminishes and their appetite for genuine closeness and caring is liberated, aggressive or victimized children will begin to enjoy genuinely pleasurable relationships.

Another key to success with the overly aggressive or victimized child is to anticipate and not be confused by backsliding, which is always part of the healing process. As children's constructive motives gain influence and they make progress in positive relating, their need for unhappiness will go ungratified and reassert itself, which will result in backsliding. For example, the child who had been hitting but is getting better at responding verbally may have an episode of blowing up and hitting another child. Most important is not to overreact, but to show the child you understand that she has made a lot of progress and that some slips are inevitable. This is not to condone the anti-social behavior, but rather to emphasize to the child that all is not lost because her needs for unhappiness temporarily reasserted themselves. Over time, the child will recognize the superiority of constructive pleasure and will become less vulnerable to the pull of unhappiness masquerading as happiness.

I would not be surprised to hear that some of you are thinking that this approach rewards bad behavior and is too permissive. This conclusion, however, is not supported by scientific evidence. "Bad behavior" is either the result of a learned inner unhappiness that will be exacerbated by punitive responses or it is the result of age-appropriate immaturity that needs to be handled with loving regulation. In reality, kindness must come from within – compliance will not serve to make an

individual compassionate in the absence of external monitors. The way to inculcate children into a culture of kindness is to model it yourself and to tailor your expectations to a genuine understanding of what is age-appropriate. This will ensure the long term goal of raising children to become adults who will want to be caring and compassionate when they are on their own.