

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Seeds of Empathy Sown in Childhood

“Empathy is probably the greatest single gift of our species.”
—Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., co-author, *Born to Love*

WHEN I PUSHED ASIDE FOOD I didn't like, my parents reminded me that there were “hungry children in China.” My six-year-old mind couldn't conjure up images of their situations so I wasn't spurred to compassion. My parents didn't talk in those terms. Their goal was getting me to eat, not developing my insight into problems related to world hunger. Concepts like “global awareness” and childhood empathy and philanthropy were years ahead of their thinking.

Fast-forward to 2013, when as an educator, author, and grandparent, I have witnessed a transformation in consciousness related to teaching children compassion and awareness of people across the globe. I have written before about meeting nine-year-old Marin County resident Vivienne Harr, barely tall enough to reach a podium to speak to 200 adults, who has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to end child slavery around the world.

Vivienne is not alone. A study conducted by the IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy found that nearly nine out of 10 children ages eight to 19 give to charity. Kathy Calvin, president and CEO of the UN Foundation, said, “This study confirms what we at the UN Foundation view as one of the most powerful trends of our time. Young people are a force for positive change in the world. From grade school students raising money to fight malaria to teenage girls advocating against child marriage, today's young people aren't waiting to make a difference.” The study found that when parents both talked about and demonstrated charitable giving, it encouraged their children's interest in reaching out to others in their own communities or abroad.

At the Saranap Community Association's free Toy & Clothing Boutique on October 6, children had the chance to participate with their parents in heartfelt giving first hand. Before the event, children had the chance to put aside toys, games, and clothes for others. More than 500 people attended the giveaway, including over 200 children who came from as far away as Bay Point and Richmond.

Schools have become innovators in developing students' compassion and desire to serve others. Every year, Stanley Middle School in Lafayette holds a “hunger luncheon.” Instead of bringing lunches, students buy tickets and are randomly assigned to a first-, second-, or third-world eating area, each representing actual statistics on world eating. Very few students get to sit at a first-world table with a tablecloth and delicious turkey dinner. Many more get to eat in the second-world bleachers, where they receive small portions of beans and rice. Most sit in the third-world area on the floor, with only a small bowl of rice as their meal. Stanley Principal David Schrag says, “We have some cranky hungry children, but it's a powerful experience. We also have a director of the Contra Costa–Solano food bank come to speak about what young people can do to help.”

In the education world, the ability to act responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind is considered a 21st-century skill. Many states are making global awareness a priority in their curricula. More importantly, families today are discovering that working together on projects that help others brings them real fulfillment. As Vivienne Harr says, “My heart feels the most full when I give.”

October 23, 2013