

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

The Science of Giving and How It Can Help Your Kids

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Want to really make your kids happy? Teach them the importance of giving to others.

Contrary to the common belief that kids need and want more “stuff” to be happy, science tells us that it is the act of giving that actually boosts happiness and can even improve health and other areas of their lives.

Children were born to give

Believe it or not, children enter this world with a natural instinct to be compassionate to others. Scientists at the Max Planck Institute discovered that infants help others even though they are too young to have learned about being kind and polite. The children take action because of their own motivation, and not because they expect a reward.

In fact, humans have evolved over time to be compassionate, and our brains are now wired to respond to those who are suffering. Kindness has become a “survival of the fittest” trait.

Charles Darwin even advised that “communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.” In other words, the better we get along and help each other out, the more successful our society will be.

Do children continue to show compassion as they grow? A breakthrough study by psychologists at the University of British Columbia determined that young children are happier to give than to receive. Toddlers who were asked to give away their own treats expressed greater happiness when they shared with others.

The researchers interpreted the results of this study to mean that anytime people participate in pro-social behavior, such as volunteering and giving charitable donations, we experience an increase in happiness.

While children have the foundation to be kind, it's our job as parents to continue to nurture this part of them as they grow. If we neglect to do so, negative life experiences can unfortunately tear down this beautiful instinct.

How giving transforms our kids

Numerous studies have uncovered several ways that giving enhances our children's lives.

Boosts happiness

When we make others happy by giving a gift or our support, we experience a physiological change called a helper's high. This euphoric physical sensation results from our brain releasing chemicals called endorphins.

According to “Psychology Today”, the helper's high is similar to a drug-induced sensation. It makes us feel good naturally, giving us a rush that leaves us elated and excited. This positive energy is similar to how we feel after exercising.

Improves health

Research shows that giving leads to better health, even among the sick and elderly. In his book “Why Good Things Happen to Good People”, Stephen Post, a professor of preventative medicine at Stony Brook University, explains that giving to others has been shown to increase health benefits in people with chronic illness.

In addition, a 1999 study led by Doug Oman of the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that giving may improve physical health because it helps reduce stress.

Finally, a 2006 joint study by Johns Hopkins University and the University of Tennessee indicated that people who helped others had lower blood pressure than participants who did not.

Promotes social connection

Several studies suggest that when we give, our generosity is ultimately rewarded by others.

These positive actions promote a sense of trust and cooperation that strengthens our relationships. Moreover, we feel a bond toward those who we help.

All of this is important because having positive social interactions is central to good mental and physical health.

Encourages an attitude of gratitude

When we give to those in need, we feel a sense of gratitude because it puts things in perspective.

Volunteer work is a great opportunity for our children to appreciate what they have and gives them a glimpse of the broader world. Meanwhile, gratitude is another very important ingredient for happiness and good health.

Gives children the opportunity to inspire others

Those on the receiving end of a good deed typically want to pass along that positive feeling and help others.

Researcher James Fowler at the University of California, San Diego, found that just one act of kindness can inspire several more acts of kindness by others. In this case, children have the opportunity to mentor others, inspiring a chain of kindness and compassion.

How to teach children about giving

Teaching our children how to pay it forward is easier than you may think. There are endless opportunities to volunteer as a family and give our children meaningful experiences that will enhance both their lives and the individuals they help.

Here are some tips on how to incorporate giving into your children's lives.

Discuss how they can help

Find a few minutes during your day to ask your children who they would like to help. Provide some options, such as babies, animals, people without homes, children who do not have families, students who need books, or the elderly. Talk about the different types of projects you can do to help those in need. For some inspiration, read [books](#) about giving and kindness to your children.

Talk about the importance of charitable giving

If you choose to start a monetary collection for charity, consider creating giving boxes for each child. Ask them to set goals about how much they would like to give throughout the year and which organizations they would like to donate to. Check in weekly or monthly throughout the year to see how close they are to reaching their goal.

Help your children discover their passion

Our passion should drive how we give. When we are excited about a project, we can put all of our heart and soul into it. Also, when we care about what we're working on, we'll get more out of it and feel happier. Help your children identify their talents, skills, and interests that they can put to good use.

Give as a group

Volunteering with others during a community service event accentuates the happiness boost because you are also building positive social connections.

Choose projects close to home

Giving to a place locally where you can actually see and experience the results is most effective. Studies have also found that we're happiest when we give to a charity through a friend, relative, or social connection rather than simply making an anonymous donation to a cause halfway around the world.

Find ways to volunteer as a family

By volunteering as a family, you make giving a priority and build it into your family's daily routine. There are countless ways to do this. If you don't find something out there that you love, create it yourself.

Here are some wonderful resources to identify family-friendly volunteer opportunities.

Generation On's Family Volunteer Guide: This online handbook provides many fabulous tips for families embarking on new volunteer activities, such as age-appropriate ideas, a searchable database to locate local opportunities, and ways to reflect after a project is complete.

Doing Good Together's Start Your Kindness Practice Worksheets: These easy, printable worksheets guide your family in identifying your interests, priorities, and talents so you can choose volunteer projects suited to you.

PBSkids.org's Family Guide to Volunteering: This comprehensive printable booklet explains how to choose a project, provides important reminders while on-site at a project, and offers ways to reflect and share your experience.

Idealist.org: This is one of the best sites for searching volunteer opportunities all over the world. The best part is they have an option to locate projects that are appropriate for families to do together.

There is certainly no shortage of ways to help others. The next time you feel like your child's playroom or bedroom closet is going to explode, ask them to fill a bag with items to give to kids who could really use them. By providing our children with opportunities to give, they will be happier and healthier, and have the power to pass along that goodness to so many people.

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