

The psychology of kindness - 5 tips to encourage your child to be kind

Issued by [dotGOOD](#)

8 Feb 2023

We can make an immense impact on those around us simply by spreading kindness. Random Acts of Kindness Week is observed annually from 14-20 February; it's a celebration of all the ways we can become a positive influence in each other's lives. As the school year is back in full swing, Anel Annandale, an educational psychologist with a passion for Early Childhood Development, unpacks the psychology of kindness and provides five tips to encourage kindness in our children below.



Kefilwe Matlhakoana (left) and Asinalo Tshenge (right) from Asteri Primary School in Gauteng go over the Manhattan Kindness Alphabet poster, a toolkit provided to the school with ideas on ways to be kind.

1. Create a culture of kindness

Kindness doubles when we share it – a ripple effect that transforms our community into a happier place.

Whether rich or poor, young or old, the beauty of being kind is that anyone can do it. Creating a culture of kindness begins in childhood. Teach your children to ask themselves daily: “How can I be kind today?”

For young children, sharing a sweet is the most basic demonstration of kindness, and this behaviour should be acknowledged and encouraged. “Our products are often central to acts of kindness, and as such, we have made it our brand’s purpose to inspire kindness,” says Monique Spandeel, Manhattan brand manager. “So far, we have encouraged over 43,000 learners to be kind through school engagement and toolkits. But kindness starts at home, and we need a collective effort to change behaviour,” she adds.

2. Praise character; discipline behaviour

Teaching kindness can change who a child becomes and gently moulds them into happier, empathetic, more likeable people.

When you praise a child for good behaviour, make it part of their character. For instance, you want to say something like: "You are a very kind person," as opposed to "that was a kind thing to do." Eventually, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead children to spread their kindness in the future.

On the other hand, when disciplining a child, focus on their behaviour rather than their character, e.g. "That was a hurtful thing to do," not "you're being a hurtful brat." Never accept rude behaviour, even if your child is going through difficult times.

3. Model the behaviour you want to see

We know that children are more likely to mimic our behaviours than listen to our advice. They do as we do and will learn to be either kind or unkind from us.

As you go about your day, ask yourself: Am I modelling to my children how to show respect to everyone I interact with, no matter their social status? Am I tolerant of others? Do I demonstrate cooperation, empathy and generosity?

Also, remember to thank your children when they are kind to you. Connect with them by holding eye contact when they tell you a story and talk to them about their day at dinner or bedtime – be sure not just to hear but really listen to what they have to say.

4. Kindness = boundaries and discipline

The happiest children are those with set boundaries and discipline instilled by their caregivers.

Discipline is about teaching and guiding behaviour; it is not about punishment. It is a way to teach our children to cope better with life and be more regulated, better-adjusted members of society. Be sure to always set boundaries before disciplining a child. That way, your child knows what is expected of them.

Never discipline your child out of anger but rather with the intent to teach better ways of behaving. Keep the three "R's" of discipline in mind: Remove, Reflect and Reconnect.

Destructive feelings are a normal part of growing up; being a strong role model and mentor will help them to navigate and manage BIG emotions.

5. Encourage random acts of kindness

Performing random acts of kindness helps children develop empathy and internalise moral principles. It creates a sense of pride in themselves and feelings of belonging and optimism.

There are many easy ways to incorporate random acts of kindness into our daily lives, and they need not cost much.

- Volunteer to clean up, whether you are clearing the table or sweeping an elderly neighbour's driveway.
- Give a kind word or a sweet treat (I love Manhattan's 'Be Kind' gums).
- Invite someone sitting on their own over to have lunch with you.
- Offer a smile or a compliment.
- Freeze water in empty bottles and hand them out to street vendors on hot days.
- Pick up litter, put back your trolley, and give up your seat to someone who needs it more.
- Let someone know that you're thinking of them.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen or animal shelter.
- Read to a younger child.

- Leave an encouraging comment on a post that you like.

“Encouraging kindness in children helps them understand the world from a broader viewpoint. It builds empathy and increases their frame of reference, encouraging them to cooperate with others to reach shared goals. In the bigger picture: teaching children to be kind eventually makes the world a better place,” concludes Annandale.

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