

# IT PAYS TO BE NICE: TIPS FOR RAISING KIND KIDS

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Bullying is the most serious social problem facing our school children today. The consequences of bullying are multi-faceted. It distracts and lowers school achievement. Bullying is the largest cause of suicide in children. It is well documented that school children who resort to gun violence have been victimized themselves.

In an age of school shootings, gang violence and teens beating homeless people, all parents must be asking themselves the simple question, why? How can some children commit these despicable acts of cruelty, hatred and violence? Why do some children only do the right thing when they are being watched or think that they will be rewarded? Why do some children lie and deny their unkind actions when reprimanded?

How can we help our children from becoming victims or bullies themselves? After 17 years as a school counselor, I believe the answer starts at home.

## Start Teaching Early

Name-calling, exclusion from play, insipid competitiveness and other mean behaviors start before kindergarten. Children need to be taught awareness of others and friendship-making skills as soon as they are able to interact. Parents of toddlers are eager to teach potty training and teeth brushing but often neglect teaching healthy social skills that include kindness and empathy.

Children who can maintain friendships will grow up to have positive relationships. Talking to young children about their own feelings is a great first step for learning to get along with others. Parents can say, "I see how happy you are because Johnny shared his cars with you. Next time you can share your toys with him to make him happy." A statement like this teaches children to recognize their own feelings and appreciate

how they can have productive interactions with their peers. This sentiment needs to be repeated to be the most effective.

## Model Kindness

If children see their parents being kind and respectful to others, chances are they will do the same. Let your children see you being considerate and thoughtful to your friends, neighbors and in public with strangers. When you're in line at the store, let the person with one item go ahead of you. If you find something that doesn't belong to you, try to return it. Speak kindly of others, especially in front of young children. They are watching you.

Encourage your children to treat others the way they would like to be treated. If you know of someone who is grieving or otherwise suffering, do something nice for that person. Bring food. Send a card. Involve your children. They can draw a picture or write a nice note. Remind children of all ages to think of others' feelings and needs.

Acts of charity and kindness will benefit your children as much as the receiver of the kindness. Remind them of their blessings. Teach them not to expect anything in return. Be kind just because it is the right to do.

## Teaching School Smarts

I teach my students about peaceful ways to solve conflicts, and we discuss ethical dilemmas. Parents can have similar conversations with their own children at home, instilling their own values. Ask your kids what they would do if they witnessed a student stealing, cheating on a test or bullying another child. You may be surprised by their responses.

Being kind doesn't mean students are to be taken advantage of or need to be

overly giving. It simply means to consider feelings and avoid taking part in social cruelty. School meanness includes more than the tougher kids picking on those they perceive as weaker to gain control. Unkind acts can be subtle and go unnoticed by teachers.

Talk to your children about avoiding name-calling, negative comments, nasty looks and laughing at jokes that could hurt someone's feelings. If a peer says something unkind to your children, always tell them to be nice back. Getting into altercations always leads to bigger problems and could put your children at risk. Encourage your children to communicate with you if they are having social problems with their peers. Work together to find peaceful solutions.

Encourage your kids to compete with themselves for self-improvement instead of placing value on outdoing their peers. Teach them to be gracious winners and losers in sports and other types of competitions. It's great to win, but knowing how to lose with dignity builds character and makes victory sweeter.

Teach your children that they can never control others' actions. They may influence more positive events by being kind to others. Their peaceful reactions to unkindness will most likely result in something positive. Most importantly, it will lead your children to be able to cope with conflict.