Cultivating Caring Kids

Character education may be "countercultural," but it could be just what we need.

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“Be kind whenever possible,” the Dalai Lama once wrote. He then added a kicker: “It is always possible.”

According to Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist and emeritus professor of Education at SUNY Cortland, acts of kindness become likely as well as possible when parents teach their children morality, compassion, and generosity. In How to Raise Kind Kids, Lickona provides a long list of practical suggestions for seizing – and creating – opportunities to cultivate good character.

Source: Pixabay
Lickona is, for better and worse, a traditionalist. He does not address changes in family structure in the United States, especially the reduction in households with two parents, and the relevance of these changes to his recommendations. Equally important, although Lickona acknowledges the challenges posed by our toxic political climate, culture of entitlement, the dominance of social media, and the sexualization of society, he does not adequately examine the great and growing impact of peers on the values and behavior of young people. His remedies – one-on-one and dinner table conversations that pose questions like “have you ever had a friend who was a bad influence?” and encouraging kids to join church youth groups, Scouts, and 4-H clubs – seem, well, a bit dated.

That said, *How to Raise Kind Kids* is a valuable primer on character education that provides parents the motivation and tools to get started. Lickona reminds his readers that being kind does more than make others happy. Altruism is hard-wired in human beings: even in two year olds, a “helper’s high” activates the part of the brain that stimulates joy. Caring also enhances emotional and physical health throughout life.

Respecting and obeying legitimate moral authority, Lickona maintains, is a foundational social principle. Authoritative parenting, however, should not be arbitrary. Parents should give children a voice and responsibility in the family; they should be empowered to participate in decisions that affect them and others. Lickona recommends a “family mission statement” that lays out core values; family meetings that hold individuals accountable; a quick round of “gratefuls” at meals; and a “talk it out space” where conflicts can be addressed. An advocate of the assignment of substantive chores to every member of the family, Lickona claims that paying kids for their work robs them of opportunities to develop the habit of helping; he cites studies that indicate that external rewards weaken the intrinsic motivation to do the right thing. And he gives a shout-out to a junior high school in a tough neighborhood in New York City that required students to perform an altruistic act each day for seven days, record the experience in a diary, and reflect on how it affected their sense of self.

Lickona believes that discipline is essential to successful character education. Expectations should be clear – and set high. If behavior is inappropriate, parents might consider giving the “culprit” a chance for a “redo.” Sometimes, Lickona suggests, parents can avoid power struggles by giving their children a choice: “Tonight is bath night. Would you like to take it right now, or should I set the timer for five minutes?” However, although parents should avoid acting in anger and try to take account of each child’s temperament, they should not shrink from delivering “stern correction,” when appropriate.

Lickona provides a boatload of web sites, book titles, and examples of kindness projects and life goals that confirm, complement and supplement his approach. At the same time, he recognizes that creating a culture of kindness and respect these days is “in many ways countercultural.” With *How to Raise Kind Kids*, he has made a compelling case that a counterculture may be just what we need.