

When Do Altruism and Kindness Begin in Our Lives?

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An adult dropped a bowl in the presence of an 18-month-old. The toddler scurried across the room, picked up the bowl, handed it to the adult, and then walked away. This seemingly clumsy behavior of an adult is actually part of a series of studies undertaken by Felix Warneken, the Joy Foundation Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute and the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University. Warneken was interviewed about his research by Susan Seligson for an article “Overturning Assumptions about the Nature of Altruism” for the *Radcliffe Magazine*.

Seligson describes an incident in Warneken’s life that might seem of little consequence to many people but had a significant impact on him. Warneken was intrigued as a graduate student at the Max Planck Institute in Germany by the question if helping behaviors might be innate and if children even under the age of two could display such behaviors. Would a toddler understand and offer help if someone needed it? Warneken reported that some of the senior faculty members doubted that toddlers would do so.

Then one day while Warneken was involved in an unrelated study, he accidentally dropped a ball. A toddler in the room picked up the ball and handed it to him. The reaction of the toddler was to serve as a catalyst for Warneken to initiate various experiments about the roots of altruism. In one study, Warneken, while in the presence of an 18-month-old, carried a stack of magazines to place in a cabinet. He repeated the action, but this time he made believe he was unable to open the closed cabinet doors and “groaned in obvious dismay.” At least half of the time, the child came over to the cabinet and pulled the door open. The same behaviors occurred in a study in which the child helped to open a flap on a box.

Seligson writes about another study in which children left their play to assist an adult who had dropped his pen. “This looks a whole lot like altruism—helping another with no benefit to oneself—so Warneken went on to mix things up by offering toys as rewards when the children helped.”

Adding the dimension of rewards piqued my interest. In previous articles I have reported studies indicating the negative impact of rewards on children's motivation. Thus, I wondered what Warneken discovered when he introduced rewards to children for engaging in altruistic behavior. He reports, "In fact, the rewarding could even decrease the helping behavior; when I rewarded them over and over again, they were later less likely to help than children who'd received no award."

I believe there may be several reasons for this seemingly paradoxical finding, including that if altruistic inclinations are innate, the introduction of rewards, lessens (cheapens?) the motivation for this behavior.

Psychologist Michael Tomasello, co-director of the Max Planck Institute where Warneken had studied, expressed observations similar to those of Warneken at a series of lectures he offered at Stanford University that were summarized by Adam Gorlick in the *Stanford Report*. Tomasello asserts, "From when they first begin to walk and talk and become truly cultural beings, young human children are naturally cooperative and helpful in many—though obviously not all—situations. And they do not get this from adults; it comes naturally."

Innate Altruism and Contributory Activities

Warneken and Tomasello's belief in the innate quality of altruism parallels a position that my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have advanced for many years, especially in our books about nurturing resilience in children, namely, that there appears to be an inborn predisposition in children to want to help others. While, as Tomasello expresses, they may "not get this from adults," I do believe that whether these predispositions are strengthened and actualized throughout our lives depends on the role of parents and other caregivers. It is for this reason that Sam and I have advocated that children be provided opportunities to engage in "contributory activities" from an early age, that is, behaviors that are rooted in assisting others.

I first discussed the importance of contributory activities more than 35 years ago, and since then I have become even more convinced that a major component for living a purposeful, meaningful, resilient life is to enrich the lives of others. The evidence that children naturally display altruistic behavior only reinforces this view. As I have often conveyed in my workshops, "Ask children to do their chores and they may not show the

motivation you would like. However, say to them that you need their help, and they are much more likely to pitch in.”

While the roots of altruism and compassion seem present at a very early age, they cannot be left to blossom on their own but rather need the input of adults. This was evident in the research I summarized in my September article that was conducted by psychologist Richard Weissbourd at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In studying middle and high school students, he found that they placed a higher priority on achievement than on caring for others. And interestingly, these students thought their parents also viewed high achievement on the part of their teens as a more important goal than caring. This finding should not be interpreted to imply that parents are not interested in raising caring children, but rather such a goal is secondary to achievement in activities such as academics or sports.

Kindness throughout the Lifespan

The benefits of parents and other caregivers nurturing a child’s predisposition for kindness has far-reaching implications throughout the lifespan for both those displaying kindness and those being the recipients of this behavior. This was evident in an interview conducted by Charles DeCicco with Linda Kaplan Thaler that appeared in *The City College of New York Alumnus*. The title of the article was “Be Nice and Show Some Grit!” Kaplan Thaler, an expert in the field of advertising, is Chairman of the U.S. flagship office of Publicis Worldwide and the author of the bestselling book *The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness*.

In the article Kaplan Thaler recounted acts of kindness that she experienced or witnessed that had a lasting influence on her own behavior. “When I was a youngster, my Dad took me to his office. When we arrived he said to his assistant, ‘Betty, I’m going for a coffee, would you like one?’”

Kaplan Thaler later asked her father, “Betty is your secretary, shouldn’t she be getting coffee for you?” to which her father responded, “Linda, I couldn’t do my work without Betty’s help. You must treat the people who work for you with respect.”

What a wonderful lesson for a child, leading Kaplan Thaler to observe, “It’s not the cutthroat, dog-eat-dog places where people are stabbing one another in the back that do the best work and succeed.” She added that being kind to others “is like the seeds that

you spread around; you never know where they're going to pop up. Simply saying 'please' and 'thank you' helps create a positive environment. Conversely, negative impressions are like germs that spread like wildfire."

Another example of the power of being nice that Kaplan Thaler offered in DeCicco's article concerned Frank, the security guard in the building. "Frank is someone we all like and treat with respect and affection. He's not employed by us, but he works for us by keeping us safe. So we treat him like a member of the staff." And the unforeseen benefits of this behavior? When Kaplan Thaler's firm was bidding for an advertising account of a major bank, "the bank's CEO decided to visit our agency to get a feel for what type of people we are. So he came to our building and approached Frank to ask directions to our office. Frank said, 'They are the nicest people in the building,' and praised us to the sky."

The CEO later informed Kaplan Thaler that "he decided to give us the account before he got to our office because he felt that if we treated Frank that well, we're the kind of agency he wanted to handle the account."

This vignette reminded me of an occasion when I gave an evening presentation at a school. I arrived 45 minutes prior to my talk to chat with the principal and to check on the AV equipment. When we walked to the auditorium, a custodian was working in another hallway. The principal took a detour in order to introduce me to the custodian and as he did so he said, "Just wanted to introduce you to John. The school would not be as good as it is without him. He makes certain everything looks great."

I shook John's hand and we chatted for a few minutes. It was obvious that the principal's comments had touched him. As I was leaving to go to the auditorium, he told me that everyone loves working with the principal, adding, "This school is like a second home to me."

I wanted to read more articles about the theme addressed by Kaplan Thaler and decided to do a Google search, typing in words such as "kindness" and "niceness." Not surprisingly, many citations emerged. A number focused on steps we could take to raise more caring, compassionate children, the theme I focused on in my September article.

Other pieces paralleled the position advocated by Sam Goldstein and myself that acts of kindness not only enriched the lives of others but our own lives as well. As one

example, Lindsay Holmes wrote in *The Huffington Post* about the ways in which being nice to others was actually good for ourselves. She cited research to support the following points:

It could help us to live longer.

We're happier when we're kind.

It may be the key to success.

It may bring you less stress.

It just feels better.

Kindness and Niceness as a Negative Trait?

Holmes raises another point in her essay that was the basis of several other articles I read. She notes, "What is technically a positive trait can also be seen as equally, well, negative. If you're *too* nice, you run the risk of coming off as *disingenuous* or *insecure*. You also may appear to be a pushover (or worse, you might actually *be* a pushover). Not to mention, there's also that whole 'finish last' cliché."

An article "Why I Quit Being Nice" by Allison Vesterfelt that appeared in the [storyline.blog](#) captured the seeming downside on kind behavior. She came to the realization that being "nice" prevented her from offering her opinion about things for fear of being rude, that it kept her from engaging others for fear that "I was going to hurt someone, or offend someone, or mess everything up."

In taking steps to deal with these anxieties, Vesterfelt found that using the word "kind" instead of "nice" was helpful. "I care about people, and want them to feel loved, noticed, and important. But 'niceness' as I defined it all those years was actually getting in the way of what I was trying to accomplish. Sometimes niceness isn't very kind at all. For some, the words might be interchangeable. But for me, it helps to make a distinction."

Jessica Stillman, echoed several of Vesterfelt's observations in an article in [Inc.com](#) "5 Ways Being Too Nice Can Hurt You" with the subtitle, "Kindness Is Always in Style, but Being a Pushover Can Hurt You in Many Different Ways," including:

People will see you as weak.

You forget to be nice to yourself.

You attract the wrong kind of people.

Some people will distrust you.

You'll warp your expectations.

The articles by Versterfelt and Stillman reminded me of similar comments I have heard in response to my discussion of the importance of being empathic, of being able to place oneself inside the shoes of others and see the world through their eyes. Renowned psychologist Daniel Goleman views empathy as a basic component of both emotional and social intelligence.

Some people believe that if you are too empathic people will take advantage of you. Parents frequently voice this concern in relation to their children. As one parent said, "If I'm too empathic with my kids they will see me as weak and not listen to me." My reply to this perspective is that the most effective disciplinarians are typically very empathic since they always attempt to understand the world through the eyes of their children and consider, "How do I discipline my children in ways that they will listen to me and learn responsibility and self-discipline rather than become increasingly resentful and angry?"

I frequently add, "If our kids or others take advantage of us, it is not because we are empathic but rather that we have not learned how to establish and adhere to realistic expectations and limits in a comfortable manner." Being kind and considerate is not mutually exclusive from showing "grit" as Kaplan Thaler observes and need not be associated with being taken advantage of, of being seen as a pushover, of being afraid to offer opinions. If we are kind to others but harsh towards ourselves we are likely to witness the emergence of self-doubt, self-pity, and self-loathing.

Small Acts of Kindness

Reinforcing the seemingly innate nature of altruism, whether in children or adults, can involve what have frequently been referred to as "small acts of kindness." Using words such as "please" and "thank you," offering to help a neighbor or a colleague with a particular task, expressing gratitude as the principal did towards the custodian are but a few illustrations of kindness and altruism. Even one small act can have a long-lasting positive impact. And, as I emphasized above, none of these commendable behaviors need lessen our own sense of dignity and self-worth.

Let us remember that we serve as models for our children. Modeling positive actions is a far more effective teaching tool than lecturing. Performing charitable deeds as a family is a very powerful way of reinforcing the innate altruism that is posited to exist in each of us. We will all benefit from these deeds.

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