

## **Kindness**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In considering what topic to address in this month's column, I was influenced by two events that I experienced during the past few weeks. Both revolved around the theme of kindness—a theme that resonates with my interest in nurturing caring and resilience in our lives and the lives of our children.

The first event actually began this past summer when I taught two sessions of a week-long seminar related to school climate, motivation, and resilience sponsored by the Learning and the Brain organization. The seminars, which were held in Boston, attracted attendees from the United States, Canada, South America, South Africa, and Europe and featured thoughtful observations and insights from the participants.

Three of the educators were from the Monomoy School District on Cape Cod, which encompasses the towns of Chatham and Harwich. They included Scott Carpenter, the Superintendent of Schools, Melissa Maguire, the Director of Student Services, and Marc Smith, the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. During the week they described various programs in their school district that reinforced the social-emotional development of students.

As one example, they told me about the “620 rule” promoted by Bill Burkhead, the high school principal. Bill wrote a blog for the Massachusetts School Administrators' Association that was also posted on the Monomoy website in which he explained the 620 rule, a number derived from the fact that there were 620 students enrolled at the school.

Bill stated, “Once we focus on kids as individuals and not groups/classes/cliques/clumps/etc. we allow ourselves to collectively get to know each of them as individuals and are more willing to do whatever it takes to push them, support them, involve them, and love them.”

Bill continued, “I personally have challenged myself to commit to the 620 rule and model it, by learning all 620 student names. I took our school photo ID book home for the summer and began to study EVERY student's name and picture. I carry it with me daily and practice—I am making progress.”

When Melissa learned that I had a speaking engagement scheduled during the fall on Cape Cod for a mental health organization, she wondered if I might drive down earlier

to meet with some of the Monomoy staff and learn more about their programs.

Fortunately, I was able to do so. During my visit I was very impressed with the ways in which students were made to feel part of a family. As I walked around the high school with Bill, I saw that he indeed knew the names of the students we passed in the hallway.

### **A “Kindness Club”**

I spoke with several Monomoy administrators and faculty about their efforts to promote a welcoming, caring attitude from preschool through high school. I was informed about a "Kindness Club" at Chatham Elementary School, a school that houses students from pre-K through grade 4 with Robin Millen as its principal. In learning about this Club that is facilitated by Guidance Counselor Jill Malinowski, I immediately thought of the “Kindness Curriculum” developed by renowned neuroscientist Richard Davidson and several of his colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. The Kindness Curriculum, which I described in my April 2018 article, involved opportunities for preschool children to express kindness towards each other and to learn to meditate. The curriculum had a positive impact on many aspects of their behavior, including increased empathy and self-regulation.

A few days ago I received a wonderful gift, a bound book that contained one-page accounts written and illustrated by a number of children in the Kindness Club. A cover letter included a history of the Club. The catalyst for its formation was of special interest to me since it was based on a major intervention I consistently apply to reinforce student engagement and resilience, namely, to provide opportunities for students to contribute to the well-being of others.

The cover letter read: “The Kindness Club started in 2017 with three members. It began as a ‘Response to Intervention’ plan for a student who had school avoidance and low engagement in school issues.” At a meeting, the child’s parents observed that their daughter was very involved in many philanthropic activities outside of the school. Consequently, the school “implemented a plan to increase engagement by directly connecting this student to her preferred activities inside of school as well.” The intervention, which included expressing gratitude and engaging in an act of kindness towards others, proved very effective for this child and soon for many other students as well.

Within two months of its inception, the Club membership grew to approximately 25 students in grade 3. Students joined by signing up and committing to giving up one recess or lunch period per week to perform a “kind act.” Students decide the ways in which such acts can be expressed, but teachers and administrators can request the Club to assist with special programs or classroom supports. Students created a “Kindness Badge” that they wear so that teachers will know that they are involved in a kindness activity and not roaming the halls during their recess or lunch periods.

As of last month, there were 134 students in grades 2-4 enrolled as members of the Club. What I found delightful is that there are now 4 “KITS” (Kindness Club Members in Training) in grades K and 1. KITS was initiated because these younger children wanted to join the Club and were disappointed to learn that they had to wait until grade 2. As interest in membership in KITS increased, faculty assigned “seasoned” student members to help train the younger students.

The following are a sample of what students wrote about their experiences in the Kindness Club that was included in the book that was sent to me:

“We help students throughout the school. By that I mean we spread kindness everywhere. We do these activities during recess. This makes me feel good, like I’m making someone feel good. I think it makes others feel appreciated.”

“I am part of the Kindness Club. This year we had a Secretary Appreciation Week and a Custodian Appreciation Week.”

“I am in 4th grade. We help kindergarten in gym and in library/computers. We do celebrations like principal appreciation and more. Kindness Club is very fun.”

“Kindness Club makes posters that have kind messages to make kids happy.”

“I am in 3rd grade. We do all kinds of activities and it’s really fun! We do stuff for so many people!”

As I read the enthusiasm expressed by these members of the Kindness Club and how quickly the Club has grown, it reinforced my belief that kindness and “contributory activities” help create an atmosphere in which compassion, empathy, and learning flourish.

## **Raising Kind, Compassionate Children**

The second example occurred when I spoke at a luncheon for parents sponsored by the Horace Mann School in New York City. Wendy Reiter, the Director of Guidance in the Middle Division and someone whom I have known for years, is actively involved in developing a Parent Institute and invited me to be the inaugural speaker. The Institute has the enthusiastic support of Tom Kelly, the Head of Horace Mann.

My presentation spotlighted the importance of promoting resilience, caring, and self-discipline in children. I was impressed by the thoughtful questions that followed my talk. Afterwards, one of the parents, Amanda Salzhauer, who is a social worker, introduced herself and presented me with a copy of a book she had co-authored with her aunt, Dale Atkins, a well-known psychologist. The book is titled *The Kindness Advantage: Cultivating Compassionate and Connected Children*. I began to read it a couple of days ago and was pleased to see that Richard Davidson's work was cited in the Preface.

Although I have not yet finished reading the book, I did read an article about kindness written by Amanda and her aunt that appeared in "Greater Good Magazine," a publication of the University of California—Berkeley. The article emphasized that "we can inspire our kids to be kinder by talking about and practicing kindness ourselves."

Amanda and Dale observed that engagement in acts of kindness contributed to a "helper's high," resulting in our feeling good and motivating us to perform future acts of kindness. In the article they described three ways in which parents and other adults can serve as models of kindness.

One way is to demonstrate the impact of positive connections with others. "Since we know our kids are watching what we do and listening to how we speak, we should model having connections to all kinds of people—those who are similar to us as well as different from us. . . . If we model more inclusivity, our children can learn that connecting with others—even some different from us—is about paying attention, listening, watching, and being 'there.'"

A second strategy involves reinforcing a skill that I have highlighted in almost all of my writings and presentations—empathy. "The best way to teach your children empathy is for you to model empathy towards *them*. Be open to the range of emotions

they express, and don't try to shut them down. . . . Although we don't always know firsthand exactly what someone is feeling or thinking, we can show our kids how important it is to ask questions and to listen carefully to someone's answers in order to understand their situation better." Psychologist Daniel Goleman has written that empathy is a basic component of both emotional and social intelligence and serves to strengthen the quality of our relationships.

The third suggestion by Amanda and Dale relates directly to Davidson's Kindness Curriculum and the Chatham Elementary School's Kindness Club; it involves creating opportunities for children to enrich the lives of others. "All of us can give something, whether it is our time, talent, expertise, or material goods. By giving to others and teaching our children to do so, we are laying the foundation for their future happiness and health."

Amanda and Dale concluded, "Each act of kindness makes a difference. Even the smallest gesture of kindness communicates to someone that we respect and value them. Through kindness, we can encourage our children to be a force for good and change in the world." In this regard, Aesop wrote, "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I believe that the creation of school programs such as the Kindness Curriculum and the Kindness Club and the recommendations advanced by Amanda and Dale for parents and other caregivers testify to an increased recognition of the positive power of kindness in our daily lives. As one of the children in the Kindness Club at Chatham Elementary School observed, "I enjoy working on fun projects and handing out stickers for kindness. It makes me feel like a better person." It is evident that acts of kindness benefit both the recipients and providers of such acts.

One final thought. Displays of kindness should not be pushed aside to a future date. Ralph Waldo Emerson captured this sentiment when he wrote, "You cannot do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late."

I want to wish all of my readers a satisfying and peaceful holiday season filled with acts of kindness, however big or small.

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