

**To Nurture Caring and Empathy in Children: Let's Rely on
Modeling and Action, Not Lecturing**

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During the past month I have had the opportunity to speak with thousands of staff, faculty, and administrators in school districts throughout the United States as they prepare for the new school year. I am often asked to describe those mindsets and strategies that enrich the social and emotional climate of a classroom—a climate in which motivation, learning, and hope are reinforced in students.

One key message in all of my talks is the importance of providing students with opportunities to contribute to the well-being of others, activities that promote empathy, compassion, and resilience. My decision to devote this month's article to this topic was based, in part, upon reading a piece written by Maia Szalavitz titled "How Not to Raise a Bully: The Early Roots of Empathy." The article was published on the *Time* website.

Szalavitz writes, "Over the past decade, research in empathy—the ability to put ourselves in another's shoes—has suggested that it is key, if not *the* key, to all human social interaction and morality. . . . Although human nature has historically been seen as essentially selfish, recent science suggests that it is not. The capacity for empathy is believed to be innate in most humans, as well as some other species."

Szalavitz quotes Dachar Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, who contends, "Instead of starting from the assumption that you have to beat the badness out of a child, turn on that empathy and compassion switch."

Mary Gordon is also cited by Szalavitz. Gordon is founder of the Roots of Empathy program, a program that has been implemented in 3,000 elementary and middle schools in Canada and 40 schools in Seattle. The children observe a visiting parent and infant interact in the classroom about once a month. The experience is used to help the children think about why an infant might be crying. Gordon notes, "We love when we have a colicky baby because then the mother usually tells the class how frustrating and annoying it is when the baby won't stop crying. That gives children insight into the parent's perspective. If you look at the development of empathy, one of the key features

is perspective-taking. In coaching that skill, we help them to take the perspective of their classmates.”

In emphasizing the role that parents and other adults play in modeling empathy, Gordon asserts, “Empathy can’t be taught, but it can be caught.” Szalavitz concurs, “A child’s capacity for empathy can further be encouraged when parents model empathetic behavior themselves. When parents treat other people with compassion, selflessness, and a lack of judgment, children copy those behaviors.”

Too often in our roles as parents or other caregivers we fall into the trap of “lecturing” to children about demonstrating caring and kindness. Instead we should model these behaviors and also provide children with opportunities in which they can express compassion and kindness. I continue to be impressed with those parents and educators who have replaced lecturing with activities that allow youngsters to experience first-hand the satisfaction of displaying empathy, altruism, and caring. The following are two illustrations of this point.

SMARTS Leadership and Mentoring Program

ResearchILD and ILD (Institute for Learning and Development) in Lexington, MA are sister organizations headed by Drs. Lynn Meltzer and Bethany Roditi. They, together with their staff of researchers, educators, and clinicians, are dedicated to assisting children, adolescents, and adults with learning, attentional, or behavioral struggles to confront and manage these difficulties and lead more productive lives. I have known Lynn and Bethany for almost 30 years and value their friendship and admire their work.

One program that they founded is called SMARTS, which is described as “a unique leadership program that creates a community of students with learning and attentional differences who help each other to develop self-understanding, self-confidence, persistence, and resilience, the pathways to success.” It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the many facets and goals of SMARTS. Please visit the ResearchILD website www.researchchild.org, or more specifically, www.researchchild.org/smarts/ to gain a more comprehensive portrait of this impressive program. I would like to summarize several facets of SMARTS, especially focusing on the role of the mentor.

The SMARTS Program pairs high school and college age mentors who have been successful in dealing with learning problems with younger students who have similar difficulties. A well-organized curriculum is used to help the mentors become more knowledgeable about their own learning style and to develop strategies to improve the ways in which they learn. Mentors meet with professional staff and also interact with each other for support. Mentors, in turn, share their insights and strategies with mentees.

I have long advocated mentor-mentee programs as a format for nurturing self-esteem, motivation, and resilience in both groups. In my clinical practice I have witnessed first-hand the benefits of having my patients with learning problems assist others. It offers a concrete way for them to appreciate that whatever struggles and vulnerabilities they experience, they also have gifts to share. This past spring I had the opportunity to hear several mentors of the SMARTS Program speak at a conference. I asked one of the presenters, Kayla Masterman, if I might interview her for a future website article. Kayla accepted the invitation, very willing to share her story.

Kayla graduated from high school this past spring and recently began her freshman year at Union College in Schenectady, New York. I especially wanted to interview Kayla given her poise and ability to describe the SMARTS Program and my long-standing relationship with her family. Kayla's mother, Dr. Andrea Masterman, was a psychology intern at McLean Hospital 30 years ago, and I was one of her supervisors.

I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing Kayla. She informed me that she was tested in first grade and diagnosed with dyslexia and ADD. She noted that for a number of years she did not want to think of these diagnoses and would become uncomfortable if anyone mentioned dyslexia or ADD. "Only a few friends in middle school knew I had dyslexia, it was a secret of mine. However at ILD I felt comfortable discussing it and gradually I accepted it." Kayla added that she had accommodations in high school and learned to be an advocate for herself. When I asked how she felt about starting college, she responded that she was excited and thought she was well-prepared to manage the demands of college and continue advocating for any accommodations that she might require.

I inquired about her experiences as a mentor in the SMARTS Program. Kayla enthusiastically described her interaction with and support from other mentors, what the program taught her about her own learning style, and how she could apply this

knowledge in her conversations with her mentees. She recounted the challenge and fun of planning for events that occurred on a regular basis among the various mentors and mentees in the program as well as discussions she had with her own individual mentees.

I asked Kayla to describe the impact that the SMARTS Program had on her. She replied, “Helping younger kids get to where they are felt so good.” Kayla observed that her last mentee reminded her of herself years ago when she did not want to speak about her learning problems. Kayla displayed empathy towards this mentee, sharing her early struggles; this openness allowed her mentee to feel more at ease in revealing her belief that she was not very smart. The mentee’s progress boosted Kayla’s own self-esteem as she experienced the joy of having a positive impact on the life of another person.

Kayla concluded, “I’m not ashamed of having dyslexia and ADD at all. The SMARTS Program helped me to realize it was okay to have learning differences. I feel so comfortable now about it and can’t believe that at one time I wanted to keep it a secret. My feelings helped me to understand how the younger kids might be feeling.”

As I listened to Kayla’s journey, I was impressed by her insight, positive outlook, and resilience. In addition, I was aware that just as her mentees had benefited appreciably from their interaction with Kayla, she in turn, had benefited from her interaction with them as her own feelings of empathy, caring, and acceptance were reinforced.

The Creativity of an Assistant Principal

Randy Bolton is an assistant principal at an elementary school in Osceola, Iowa. Randy heard me speak at a conference in which I emphasized the need to adopt a strength-based approach when working with challenging students. I expressed the opinion that too often our thinking centers around how to punish these students rather than finding ways to nurture their self-dignity. I described interventions used in different programs as well as those that I had personally implemented with seemingly angry, unmotivated students; I especially highlighted strategies that involved asking these students to help others.

Randy wrote me within a week of my presentation to say that he had already begun to apply this strategy. “I’m working with a fifth-grade boy who doesn’t want to be in school, talks back to adults, fails to complete homework, etc. I mentioned that I had a

really important job for him. He immediately said, Yes!! I asked if he wanted to know what it was first and he said no, that if it was something I thought was important for him, he'd do it. I said that we had a first-grader who really needs someone to read to him. The fifth-grade boy said that he could really help the first-grader! His fifth-grade teacher told me that he told all of his classmates that he had a very important job that was going to impact a first-grader." Randy added that three more students were set up to work with some other kindergarten and first-graders and that he looked forward to seeing how things progressed in the last five weeks of school.

I thanked Randy for informing me about what he was doing and requested that he send me a follow-up e-mail at the end of the school year. Randy was kind enough to do so, and he also gave me permission to share his experience with readers of my articles and attendees at my workshops.

In mid-June Randy wrote and summarized what had occurred in the last six weeks of school when he first began enlisting older students to help younger ones. He stated that he had set up eight matches of 4-6th graders with K-2nd graders. These pairs met for about 10-15 minutes twice every 6-day cycle.

Randy observed, "It was incredible to see what happened. We have a kindergarten boy that moved into our district after Christmas. He struggles with his temper. He came into school crying. One of our adult hall monitors saw him crying and knew that I've worked with him quite a bit. I caught up with him and asked how I could help. He said I couldn't, but ----- could. That was the name of the 6th grader that he was working with. I went and got the student right away. The two met for about 5-10 minutes. The kindergartener went to class and his teacher said she hadn't known that he had come to school crying. I never asked his partner what the issue was."

Obviously the older child helped to calm the younger child, allowing the latter to enter the classroom without incident.

Randy continued, "I also had a parent of one of our older students say that she was curious why her son 'wanted' to go to school during the month of May and the first week of June. When she asked her son why, he commented, 'I have an important job at school helping a kindergarten boy to like school.'"

Randy described the success of the program with the school board, whose members were excited about what had been accomplished in just six weeks. As a result Randy plans to implement the program on a wider scale this year. He noted, “I even had older students come to me asking to be a part of this program!”

A Concluding Thought

As my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have written in our books about resilience, we believe there is an “inborn” desire or need within children to help others. I strongly advocate that we encourage and reinforce this desire by serving as empathic, compassionate models and by seeking ways in which children can express and satisfy this desire. As Kayla and Randy and many others have experienced, all parties involved in these activities will be enriched and important lifelong values will be learned.

Kayla and Randy, thanks again for your willingness to allow me to describe your inspiring stories with readers of my monthly articles.

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