

ENCOURAGING KINDNESS IN KIDS

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **VARIABLE**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that children have a strong, perhaps innate, propensity for kind or altruistic behavior, which involves acting to promote someone else's welfare, even at a cost to oneself. However, research also suggests that there are particular ways kids can be encouraged—or discouraged—from acting on this propensity.

In particular, their penchant for kindness can be influenced by how adults praise or criticize them. Sometimes, even subtle actions and word choices by parents, teachers, and other adults can make a big difference. This practice offers specific techniques that can help nudge kids toward kindness and generosity, behaviors that are not only good for the people they help but for their own well-being, too: Studies have found that altruistic people tend to have better social relationships and experience greater happiness.

TIME REQUIRED

The time required for any of these techniques will vary. Try to use one of them at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

1. **Avoid using external rewards** to reinforce altruistic behavior. For instance, you may want to think twice before telling kids that they'll get a special treat if they share their toys, or promising them extra TV time if they help clean up after dinner. As tempting as it may be to reward kids when they do something kind, that approach can backfire: They may learn that kindness is only worth performing when they'll be given some kind of prize as a result. Instead, kids should get to experience the feeling that kindness is its own reward—a view backed up by neuroscience studies showing that pleasure centers of the brain light up when people behave altruistically.
2. **Praise character, not behavior.** Research suggests that children are more likely to make kindness a habit if they are praised for being kind people rather than just for doing something kind. For example, saying, "You're such a helpful person" may be more effective than saying, "That was such a helpful thing to do." Praising their character encourages children to see kindness as an essential part of who they are and seems to be especially effective around age eight, when children are forming their moral identities.
3. **But criticize behavior, not character.** In other words, it's OK to induce guilt but not shame. Children who feel guilt ("I did a bad thing") after wrongdoing are more likely to feel remorse and make amends than those who feel shame ("I am a bad person"). Criticizing a behavior conveys that it's possible for the child to change their behavior and make better choices in the future. Such criticism may be especially effective when it also includes positive affirmation (e.g., "You're a good person, and I know you can do better.")
4. **Model altruistic behavior.** Ultimately, actions speak louder than words when it comes to cultivating altruism. Research shows that when children witness adults behaving altruistically, they are more likely to behave altruistically themselves, regardless of what the adults say to them about the importance of altruism.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Warneken, F. & Tomasello, M., (2008). [Extrinsic rewards undermine altruistic tendencies in 20-month olds](#). *Developmental Psychology*, 44

(6), 1785-1788.

Toddlers who received a material reward for helping someone in need were subsequently *less* likely to help again later, compared with those who had previously received only verbal praise or no reward at all. This has been demonstrated in a range of age groups.

Grusec, J. E & Redler, E. (1980). [Attribution, reinforcement, and altruism: A developmental analysis](#). *Developmental Psychology*, 16(5), 525–534.

Eight-year old children who were told that they were helpful *people* for performing an altruistic act (donating some of their marbles to poor children) subsequently engaged in more altruistic behavior (e.g., sharing pencils or donating drawings to sick children) than did children whose behavior alone was praised or were told nothing at all. Ten-year old children, however, benefitted from praise directed at either their character or their behavior.

Barrett, K.C., Zahn-Waxler, C., & Cole, P.M. (1993). [Avoiders versus Amenders: Implications for the investigation of guilt and shame during toddlerhood?](#) *Cognition and Emotion*, 7(6), 481-505.

Researchers looked at how the reactions of guilt-prone toddlers differed from those of shame-prone toddlers when they accidentally broke a doll. The guilt-prone toddlers were more likely to confess to breaking the doll, more likely to try to fix it, and less likely to avoid the doll’s owner—suggesting that inducing guilt in kids is more effective than inducing shame when they misbehave.

WHY IT WORKS

These strategies for fostering altruism are effective because they build on children’s deep-rooted inclinations for kindness. Using external rewards can undermine kids’ natural tendency to reap the intrinsic rewards of doing kind things for others. Praising children in ways that emphasize their altruistic character can make them more likely to see themselves as good, helpful people, and this positive identity can, in turn, make them more likely to behave altruistically in the future. On the flip side, when kids misbehave, inducing guilt rather than shame is effective because it suggests that they’re not fundamentally bad people, they just made a poor choice but are capable of making better choices in the future.

SOURCES

Many of these strategies draw from ideas and research cited by **Adam Grant, Ph.D.**, a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, in his *New York Times* article, [“Raising a Moral Child.”](#)

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

