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How to Instil Empathy and Compassion in Our Children

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Pia Wong
Bring Me A Book
Hong Kong



Loz Wong
Feeding
Hong Kong



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Kids4Kids Limited



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Playright Children's
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INTRODUCTION

“

Being a kind person is not some kind of innate talent. We can always instil empathy and compassion in our children. Other than telling our kids to be considerate, how can we bring out their kindness? Are there any methods to ensure they grow up with a kind heart?

Six professionals shared their thoughts and tips on the topic. Hope you find the tips useful!

”



JENNIFER CHIN
FOUNDER & CEO

WHIZPA



Kids' Activities. Discover. Shop. Share.

Whizpa.com is one of Hong Kong's leading online education platforms, helping to connect families with educators and activity providers. We enable parents to search for, review, and sign up for kids' activities and classes all on one convenient platform.

With over 6,000 providers listed on Whizpa.com, it is now easier than ever for parents to find the right programs for their children!

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PIA WONG

Executive Director

Bring Me a Book Hong Kong

Share books and talk about characters and feelings

Researchers at The New School in New York City have found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling, i.e. the empathy of the reader. The more effort we make trying to figure out a character's intentions, emotions, or thoughts, the greater our empathy muscles are stretched as well. This explains why we are so taken by passages from Harry Potter or Charlotte's Web. We genuinely feel sorry for Harry, living with his mean Aunt and Uncle and cousin. Even though he is a wizard and lives in the magical world of Hogwarts, so different from our own, we can still relate to the issues Harry Potter faces with friendships, spells that go wrong, questions that go unanswered and many moral dilemmas – questions about right and wrong - familiar to many readers.

Ask good questions

One very popular technique to practice and develop good questioning skills, used by thousands of parents around the world, is what literacy specialist, Diane Frankenstein called "Conversational Reading". It follows three simple steps: 1. Read a book, 2. Ask a question and 3. Start a conversation. Using "What if?" and "How would you feel?" questions is a great way to help kids step into another's shoes and think about the character from their own perspective. Conversations that move from the plot to the personal take you deeper into the story and help children see connections between the stories they read and their lives. And remember, as Mortimer Adler said, "In the case of good books, the

point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you."

Role-play

Provide imaginative activities such as role-play or fictional scenarios, to explore and reflect on characters' motivations and behavior. For example, create a simple puppet based on Mo Willems' Elephant & Piggie characters and take it in turns to be Gerald and Piggie, or even make up your own story using the puppets. One of the famous psychotherapy approaches – psychodrama – uses this strategy of setting the scene and playing a role of one or more people to help both children and adults, reach a better understanding of themselves and others. Supporting children to explore and play with a wide range of media such as art, music, movement and dance with different materials, helps to enhance not just empathy and perspective taking, but enhances creativity, imagination and expression.

Model empathy and engage in community service

Saying you are thoughtful or kind is one thing. The action that follows the feeling is where change happens. Explore volunteer opportunities in your local community to help out, individually or even better, as a family. Local charity Bring Me a Book Hong Kong offers unique and meaningful opportunities for families to read to underprivileged children. By meeting children less fortunate than themselves and seeing first-hand the lack of quality books they have access to, children can not only develop compassion and empathy, but also a sense of appreciation



“ I have known about BMAB’s great work for a number of years now and have been impressed with its growing social impact in the Hong Kong community over time. As parents to a five-year old boy, my wife and I appreciate BMAB’s well-curated Chinese and English books and its friendly staff offering customized suggestions on age-suitable books that we enjoy reading together! ”

for what they have. Bring Me a Book also has a popular “Ambassador Program”, which encourages kids to use their passion to fundraise for a meaningful cause. Ambassadors can then participate more regularly, online and off, to further their impact and spread the love of reading in Hong Kong.

Reflect daily by talking about your “Rose, Thorn and Sprout”

Set up a tradition at home where, at the end of each day, you talk about your “Rose” - something good that happened to you, for example “my teacher really liked the poem I wrote”, your “Thorn” - something bad or negative that happened to you, for example “I fell over in the playground”, and most importantly, your “Sprout” – something good that you did for someone else, or something good that someone did for you. This could be as simple as opening the door for someone or a friend letting you try his favourite snack at school. The more opportunities we give our children to reflect, to think about their day and how even very small actions can make a positive (or negative) impact, the more community-minded and empathetic our children will become.

Set high ethical standards

If children are to value others’ perspectives and show compassion for them, it’s very important that they hear from their parents that caring about others is a top priority. Even though many parents would agree with that, children aren’t hearing that message or it is diluted by the focus on

happiness. For example, instead of saying “The most important thing is that you’re happy”, you might say “The most important thing is that you’re kind and that you’re happy.” Help your children understand that the world doesn’t revolve around them. For example, insist at times, that children turn off their devices and help around the house, be polite even when they are in a bad mood and be considerate when they are talking to others.



Bring Me A Book™ Hong Kong (BMABHK) is an award-winning non-profit literacy organization with a vision of Hong Kong in which every child is read to, strengthening family and community bonds and creating a love of learning. We use evidence-based research to provide:

- Transformational trainings for parents and educators
- The best Chinese and English children’s books
- Quality programs to access authors and literacy experts

Since inception in 2006, we have installed over 450 libraries and served 180,000 children from low-income communities through our library programs.

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LOZ WONG

*Fundraising & Communications
Manager*

Feeding Hong Kong

Lead by example

How we act around our children has a huge impact on their behaviour and view of the world, and what we do is often far more important than what we say - kids are exceptionally good at spotting inconsistencies in what we say versus what we do! When I was growing up, my mother would take me and my brother to take part in local community activities like fairs and marketplaces raising funds for local causes. These early experiences opened our eyes to the needs of those around us, and showed us that we could make a difference.

Choose issues that they care about

For adults and children alike, focusing on issues that we are already interested in will tend to lead to much more rewarding experiences. For children especially, looking to incorporate an existing passion or interest when volunteering will make the experience more fun, positive, and have the kids wanting to go again!

Start small

Small, repeated actions are incredibly impactful in the long run, and much easier to get started with. Rather than trying to change the entire world in one afternoon, we can help children understand the difference that they can make to the world around them by starting locally, even

starting at home. For example, teaching children to appreciate food and not to waste it may not seem impactful, but this could help a child understand the importance of their actions, and pairing this with volunteering at a food-related organisation would lead to a deeper understanding of how our behaviour at home has wider implications. In Hong Kong, for example, over 60% of all food wasted comes from households!

Connect to the impact

Sometimes the impact of volunteering can be instantly appreciated: cleaning a beach; sharing food; providing shelter - all have immediate benefits that are easy to understand. For children, it may be easier to concentrate on these kinds of volunteering activities rather than activities where we may need to help explain how our volunteering is making a difference. Whichever type of volunteering activity you choose, the knowledge that we are able to improve the lives of those around us can be truly powerful.

Celebrate

Feeling good after doing something is a great way to instil habits and positive behaviours, and starting early can help to establish habits that last a lifetime. A celebration could be something as simple as a cheer, a hug, or a high five, that reinforces volunteering as something to feel good about.



I took my 12-year-old daughter to an afternoon with Feeding Hong Kong where we were part of a team of mums and daughters who all worked together to make sure even the youngest girls were able to contribute. It is hard to find volunteering opportunities for this age group in Hong Kong but Feeding Hong Kong made us all feel like we had made a valuable contribution and we can't wait to go back.

Read

Books involving elements of generosity, volunteering, and empathy can go a long way to fostering a sense of community and civic engagement in our children. Enabling them to then make connections between what they read and their experiences in the real world makes this especially powerful. "When Gobble Met Nibble", a locally-published book written by a Hong Kong father, is a cute, fun book that introduces ideas about responsible consumption that parents can read with their children to inspire conversations about the wider impact our actions can have.

Play

Linked to tips 2 and 5 above, incorporating elements of play into volunteering can help to make sure it is fun and something the kids will want to do again and again! For example, if taking part in a Feeding Hong Kong Bread Run (suitable for all ages with parental guidance), children can compete to see how much bread they can carry, or how many bakeries they can visit each evening.



Feeding Hong Kong is a Hong Kong registered charity with a mission to fight hunger in the city and reduce the amount of quality food being sent to our landfills. Each day, we collect high quality food that would otherwise be thrown away, sort and store it, and then redistribute it to a network of welfare organisations, who in turn feed thousands of people in need. Feeding Hong Kong also works to raise awareness about poverty and food insecurity in Hong Kong and promote healthy eating and nutritional education to the most vulnerable groups in our community. We are an accredited member of the Global Food Banking Network, an international organisation dedicated to creating and strengthening food banks and national food bank networks. For further information, please visit feedinghk.org

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MABEL SIEH

Executive Director

Kids4Kids Limited

Help them see and appreciate different cultures

Children benefit through learning about diversity from a young age. They need to know there are people who are different from their background, who live differently, speak another language, and celebrate different religions and festivals. Helping children see and appreciate differences among people will help them understand the world and needs of others, which is key to developing empathy and compassion.

Provide them with an environment surrounded by kindness

Children are authentic learners. They learn by experience not through talks. The environment they are in, be it home, school, or the social circles we put them in, is their first-hand learning space of how the world works. If we want them to be kind to others, we need to be kind to them through our actions. We need to be mindful of the environment we put them in daily, and what messages the environment gives.

Encourage them to ask questions without giving quick answers

The world is full of conflicts and ambiguity. Oftentimes there are no easy and immediate answers in what happens in the world. Giving simple, quick answers as solutions to all problems does not help children understand the situations others live in. Allowing children time to ask questions without offering quick answers will instill patience and help them understand and connect with people on a deeper level without judgement.

Engage them in compassionate activities

To turn learning into a habit, children need to practise what they learn and we can provide them with lots of such opportunities. Volunteering is an excellent way for them to practise kindness but don't forget simple tasks can also start from home, such as taking care of a sibling who is sick, spending quality time and reading with a grandparent, learning to grow a pot plant and watch it get taller and stronger every day.



“My kids have joined programs of Kids4Kids over the years - from storywriting competition to Buddy Reading volunteer work. Now in secondary school, they have participated in Powered by Youth Forum. They love it and enjoy very much participating in all the Kids4Kids activities and programs. These are engaging and meaningful programs.”

Help them appreciate simple beauty in life

In today's world, most children have many things easily available to them. Material possessions and physical comfort, if not exercised with discipline, will make us lose sight of what is truly important and what makes us human. Children need guidance to appreciate simple things in life and develop a gratefulness for what they have. Gratitude builds good character in children, and is the best friend of compassion.



Based in Hong Kong, Kids4Kids is a non-profit organisation registered in 2010. It envisions a future where all young people are changemakers with the belief that they are never too young to change the world. By creating a transformation journey for children and youth, Kids4Kids helps them to build confidence and resilience, discover their inner strengths and utilize them to contribute to the community. Its founder Michele Lai has been awarded as an Ashoka Fellow since 2019.

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POH LEE TAN

Founder

Mighty Oaks Foundation

Empathy and compassion across generations

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn”
(Benjamin Franklin)

Empathy is putting oneself in another’s shoes. Compassion puts empathy into action. A nurturing family and community need a combination of both empathy (expressing kindness) and compassion (acting with kindness). Empathy and compassion are valuable life long skills. Compassion contributes to a more harmonious community.

Mighty Oaks focuses on cultivating empathy and compassion through intergenerational collaboration, for the benefit of all. Young and old are brought together to have fun, share experiences, learn from each other and develop meaningful relationships. We work with schools, PTAs and families to cultivate empathy and compassion and encourage the young to serve elders.

How can parents help?

1. Bond with elders at home

Children from a very young age can learn to appreciate the wisdom and deep life experiences of their grandparents, and how to have engaging conversations with them. Encourage your kids to play a sport with grandparents, or cook together. Allocate time for your kids to bond with grandparents. Learning to be more respectful and patient at home enables kids to respect elders in the community. Our Anchor Children with Elders (ACE) Talks for schools encourages students to embrace empathy in creative ways.

Learn more: [Cultivating Empathy](#).

2. Serve together as a family

Serving as a family demonstrates how we can lead compassionate lives. Our children will likely internalize this for life, particularly if they start young. The pandemic has offered ample opportunities to serve together as a family. In 2020, as an immediate response to the plight of the elderly, over 3800 gifts were created by families all over HK for lonely elders, cut off from society because they are a high-risk group.

Learn more: [Heart to Heart](#)



“
I am so blessed to be part of this special and beautiful journey, where all 150 of our children were given opportunities to love and respect others. This is the beginning of a lifelong journey for them to bring love to wherever they are and to where there is need.
 ”

3. Combine your kid’s interests with service

Encourage your kids to serve with their skills and talents. Through our “Cookies for Caregivers” campaign, students who love baking are encouraged to bake cookies for elders and their caregivers. This allows children to experience directly how much more blessed it is to give than to receive. They also learn that their actions, no matter how small, can make a positive impact on needy elders.

Learn more: [Cookies for Caregivers](#)

4. Share your own service stories

Use your existing platforms to show your kids how they can serve, just where they are. Share with them how you got started, what inspired you and how the outcomes enrich you, your family and your community. We work with many PTAs and schools to light up the lives of needy elders. Parents are amongst our most enthusiastic supporters.

Learn more: [ACE Art 2021](#)

5. Turn crises into opportunities to serve

Our children are exposed to so much bleak news in the media. This can instill fear and anxiety. Talk through these issues with your children and develop a response as a family to instill positivity rather than dwell on negativity. Many became concerned when they saw that the coronavirus had spread to elderly homes in HK. See how Gianna and her mother immediately responded to uplift the spirits of Liza Por Por.

Learn more: [Gianna and Liza Por Por](#)



Connecting 39 schools and 46 elder facilities, benefiting 8,700 students and 21,400 elders.

Mighty Oaks Foundation improves lives of youth and elders through intergenerational collaboration and programs, for the benefit of all.

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MRS ANITA TANG

Chairlady

Playright Children's Play Association

Let your children PLAY!

Play and empathy are intertwined. Through play, children develop confidence and communication skills, learn to share, and practice working together towards a common goal. Play helps children build positive social relationships. Play builds bridges of shared experiences and connects children with the vast possibilities the world has to offer. For instance, children can experiment with various emotions and feelings under different play setups and scenarios. Encourage your children to imagine they are a Doctor, Bus Driver, Pirate, ZooKeeper and Parent....

Be a PLAYFUL parent

Play with your children; avoid the temptation to lead your children to play. Observe and allow your children to lead the play, and let them solve the problems they encounter during play. It is tempting to step in to help your child when they find something difficult, or are starting to disagree with other children. But that's how they learn. Give them some time to handle and deal with the situation. Position yourself at the same level so that you can have fun and enjoyable moments with your children; demonstrate empathy and compassion and your children will model after you.

Listen to children's voices, believe in them

We build empathy by demonstrating it. We honour and respect children by empathizing with them, actively listening and engaging in their voices and stories. They feel that they are important and valued when we listen to them. They learn that we respect people by genuinely listening to their ideas and perspectives, and in turn, they replicate this respect to others. Children's voices matter. I am always amazed by the creativity, authenticity and fairness from children. By respecting their voices, we provide the seeds to grow their empathy, honesty, compassion, and views.

Pillow talk on play

There are many good "teaching" moments during the process of play. Hence it is a great opportunity to "talk about it". You can engage in a conversation with your children on how his or her behavior has positively or negatively impacted other people. If there were negative feelings and behaviour during play, it is good to encourage your children to talk about his feelings, and discuss how to make amendments. Probe with a third person perspective, for example, "do you think kids should share their toys with children they do not know?". Research suggests that a simple question – asking the kids to reflect on what other people are feeling – can make a difference.



“

Me and my son absolutely LOVE this place!! He always ask me when he can go and play again. There are many activities for the little ones to play and create and for imaginary play, which are exactly what they need!

”

Create opportunities and expose your child to diversity

Most of our children will have the opportunity to play with their siblings, relatives and friends. However, playing with strangers and children that are different provides very different experiences. Playing in neighbourhood and community playgrounds has immense value; it increases the chance to expose the children to diversity - different ethnicity, family background, age groups, etc. Exposure to such opportunities allow children to see commonality despite differences. I take my children to explore different playgrounds in Hong Kong, and it is quite exciting to see how children can connect quickly. I also bring my children to play with children with special needs at Playright events.

Be a Role Model

Engage your children and your family in community services. Make it a regular family habit to share and give back to the community. Pick a few charities with your children and engage your family regularly in their activities and events. From donating part of the children's lai see money, parent-child flag selling, participating in service activities like charity

walks, beach clean up, distributing food and supplies to low income families, to baking at home for elderly home care-givers during COVID-19, there are many opportunities in Hong Kong to engage in meaningful community services. Take the time to let children understand and know the charities, and the needs of the beneficiaries. It is a good time for family to engage in non-technology environments as screen time and academic-related enrichment activities are taking an increasing proportion of our time.

智樂 **playright** 看重孩子 看得起遊戲
VALUE CHILDREN VALUE PLAY

Playright advocates the value of play for all children, be they in hospitals, with disabilities or limited access to play or playable space. Through service provision, empowerment and consultancy works, we build a society that respects, protects and fulfills a Child's Right to Play, where children can enjoy their childhood.

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SHALINI MAHTANI

Founder & Chief Executive Officer

The Zubin Foundation

My husband Ravi and I use these approaches to try and build empathy in our children Anya (12) and Devyn (9):

1. Talk to children about the real world, and the responsibility we have towards the poor

Talk to your children about the world and let them know that many people don't live like we do - with a home, three meals a day plus snacks, clean water, and school. Let them know that if we have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate than we are.

2. Let them know that they could have been “that” child.

One of the things I firmly believe is that I could have been born “them” and “they” could have been born me. Suppose I had been born into poverty, what help would I want from others? This is something I discuss with my children.

3. Be a role model

Whether you volunteer, donate or give in-kind, tell your children about it. Don't boast but let them know and see that you are taking responsibility and doing your bit. Let them see that you care for others and you use the resources you have to help.

4. Humanise all people

Show your children that people in lower paid jobs are people, just like you and me, and they have families and feelings. Raise their visibility and acknowledge the work they do to help us and the community - be it our helpers, street cleaners, security guards and others.



5. TwoPresents

TwoPresents is a game changer and is wonderful for adults and children alike. My children use it for their birthday parties every year. They get to support a charity of their choice as well as receive the birthday gift they want. Through TwoPresents there is less wastage too because your children don't end up receiving presents that will end up in a landfill.



A charity that works to improve the lives of Hong Kong's marginalised ethnic minorities by providing opportunities and reducing suffering.

We work with women and girls in crisis, period poverty, parents with special needs, children and youth in need of jobs, training and scholarships. Our services are provided in English, Hindi and Urdu.

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Got a topic that you are interested in? Or simply want to seek advice from our panel of experts?

Contact us today at info@whizpa.com