

RAISING KIDS WHO CARE

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How do we teach empathy to our children? In a society of “me, me, me,” it seems like an uphill battle to instill such virtues as kindness and generosity into the hearts of our young ones. We expect our children to share from a very young age. It’s likely that you have heard or even said the word “share” frequently at home, school or the playground. But is empathy something that is learned, something we’re born with or both?

In 1 John 4:8, we read three short words that sum it all up: God is love. When we read this, we are filled with wonder and hope. This sublime description of the Holy Trinity gives us an essential starting point to understanding ourselves because we are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, empathy and compassion are not behaviors foreign to us that we must learn or acquire, but rather they reside in our very being and are waiting to be revealed. However, these natural emotions and behaviors can only blossom, thrive and be expressed through personal encounters in relationships with others.

A one-year-old might show subtle and tender expressions of empathy and compassion toward someone who appears to be in some sort of pain. You can see his facial expressions change as his eyes look worried. Empathy is even observed among infants who begin to cry upon hearing the distress of another baby, a condition appropriately called contagious crying. Children are able, and perhaps even eager, to show compassion and empathy toward another person, even with their limited ability to physically express or verbally communicate this part of themselves that they are still learning to discover and understand.

For example, the ability to comfort others is directly acquired through our own experience of needing comfort. In other words, the instinctual desire to pick up and soothe a crying baby was instilled in us when we were that crying baby and someone soothed us. It’s not surprising to see the adverse

effects on emotional well-being and its long-term consequences on a person who was not shown love and compassion as a child, even through something as basic as being held and soothed when crying.

As a mother of four, I witness firsthand many of their interactions on a daily basis along with a roller coaster of emotions at any given time. Along with the typical sibling squabbles, there are golden moments when I see them care for and respond to each other in beautiful ways. Although interactions are never perfect, their hearts are what I’m most concerned about, and I look for and rejoice in their ability to turn toward each other with love and patience.

How can we, as Orthodox Christians, help our children reveal, nurture and cultivate the love and empathy hidden within their hearts in a society plastered with messages of self-seeking and self-fulfillment? How can we raise children who will become adults with a desire to care for and serve others wholeheartedly? Scripture repeatedly exhorts us as “the elect of God, holy and beloved” to always show “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering” (Colossians 3:12).

We can help cultivate these virtues in our children and thereby help them reject the enticements of a destructive, self-seeking culture. Here are some practical ways we can encourage them to grow in their self-realization as beloved children of God who were made to love and be loved.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Parents are the greatest example and first teachers of their children. We set the tone for their emotional health through our own words and by our actions and reactions. I can model empathy by giving my attention and time when my child is struggling with something instead of thinking he or she is being overly

dramatic. I can model empathy for others in the way I care for my spouse or my parents or a person in need. Our children are always paying attention to how we respond when these times for empathy arise. Make the best of these opportunities.

GIVE THEM OPPORTUNITIES

What better way to learn something than to actually do it? There are many community organizations that are in need of help. As a family, you can decide where you feel called to serve. Give back to the community at a soup kitchen, animal rescue center, retirement home or environmental cleanup day to give children an opportunity to cultivate a heart of service. Encouraging your children to contribute a dollar or two from their allowance during the passing of the tray after Liturgy is a great way to instill a sense of gratitude for God's blessings and the responsibility of caring for His Church.



START IN THE HOME

Siblings or nearby cousins are our first friends (or can be) and this is a great starting point to help children learn empathy and love for others. These expressions of love for their own siblings and extended family are essential in the development of their Christian identity. Children can make each other cards when they are not feeling well or are having a bad day, older siblings can help younger ones tidy up their rooms and younger siblings can learn to respect the personal space of older siblings. By encouraging them to help each other, empathy can be expressed and experienced in the home.

PRAY TOGETHER AS A FAMILY

Making time each day to gather together as a family to pray, whether around the dinner table or in front of your icon corner, in the car on the way to piano practice or to a soccer game, is how we can continually invite God's presence—His grace, peace and joy—into the often hectic and stressful daily routines of our lives. During your prayer time, remember others who may be struggling and are in need. What better way to teach our children empathy than to pray for family, friends or even strangers. Make it a point every time you pray together to say the names. Encourage children to give a list of names to your priest to commemorate during the proskomide. During this service before the Divine Liturgy, the priest prays for the living and the departed while preparing the elements that will become the holy body and blood of Christ.

As we raise our children, we do everything in our power to meet their basic needs, including food, shelter and a good education. How we help shape their characters and instill the value of empathy and love for others is not always easy to figure out. Taking small steps toward this goal in our daily lives will set them in the right direction and bring out the love that is already in them. And this love is God's gift to us.

Presvytera Tina Oshaana (MA) lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and four children. She has a background in counseling and public services. After becoming a mom, she changed her career path and decided to start homeschooling five years ago. With a love for taking on new challenges, she recently became a student of Latin!