



The Transfiguration of the Lord August 6, 2017 A

- ◆ Rules aren't enough
- ◆ Teaching kids the difference between right and wrong doesn't teach them empathy. In fact, it might do just the opposite.

The following article by Claire Zulkey appeared in the February 2017 edition of U.S. Catholic Magazine.

So much for the golden rule. A since-contested study published in the November 2015 issue of Current Biology reported that, perhaps contrary to what one would expect, children from religious families were found to be more punitive and less altruistic than children raised in secular households.

But a recent analysis of the original study showed that while children's country and culture made a significant difference in their altruism, the religious identification of their household did not. According to Azim Shariff, the lead author of the new analysis also published in Current Biology, "Religion does make people more generous, but it's by no means the only thing, or the best one."

So are religious parents off the hook? Not necessarily. It certainly is possible to teach a child morals while still missing the opportunity to teach why, says Cristina Traina, a professor of religion at Northwestern University who has studied children and moral agency. "You can teach a child not to lie and then say, 'Aha! Caught you in a lie!'" However, she says, "It's not the same as a practice of reflectively honoring the idea that you should always tell the truth."

According to Alfie Kohn, author of parenting books such as Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason (Atria Books), too many parents inadvertently teach a self-centered view toward altruism by saying things like, "If you let Jake play with your dinos, maybe he'll give you a turn with his Xbox." That, Kohn says, "doesn't help kids become caring—it leads to a self-regarding shrewdness."

To some, talking to kids about feelings can sound awfully touchy-feely, but there are serious reasons why parents should consider their children's ability to take on the perspectives of others. "Thinking about people, caring for others, showing concern for others are

integral parts of being a society," says Luba Feigenberg, research director at Making Caring Common, an initiative out of Harvard University that helps educators, parents, and communities raise children who are caring, responsible to their communities, and committed to justice. Plus, she says, higher levels of ability to take on other people's perspectives can lead to higher levels of satisfaction in relationships and more relationships that last a long time, "which is a key factor in people's quality of life because they have a support system they can rely on."

Traina adds that lacking the capacity to consider reasonable rationales for others' behavior can lead to psychological problems, depression, and huge interpersonal difficulties. She says, "You need to be able to appreciate the values behind what someone else is saying." If not, she says, "Who are you going to be?"

So how do parents go about teaching empathy, and how does this differ from teaching common courtesy?

Rethinking sharing and saying "sorry"

Melissa Boshans, a child development coordinator at Chicago's Lincoln Park Cooperative Nursery School (the Co-op), recalls a funny anecdote from work. "A kid was asked, 'What's sharing?' and he said, 'That's when my mom takes my toy away and gives it to someone else.'"

Contrary to traditional etiquette, she says, teachers at the Co-op don't make kids share at school. Instead the philosophy is that if a child chooses to play with something it's his until he's done with it, and then someone else gets a turn. If there's a conflict the teachers will say, "Oh, it looks like Johnny really wants a turn with that toy. Sarah, are you done playing with it?" If Sarah refuses, the teacher will help Johnny find something else to do. While this may seem like it's teaching selfishness, eventually Sarah will learn to see how happy it will make Johnny when she's finally done with the toy, and eventually she'll become intrinsically compelled to share.

This can be difficult to enforce in social situations. I have definitely been on playdates where another mom and I both yelled at our children to share with the other, which feels like conflicting information. Boshans' explanation is that parents think their kids' behavior

reflects upon them, and they “don’t want their kid to grab, and we don’t want kids to care if someone else grabs.” Parents, she says, need to become more realistic about what drives small children. “It would be great if parents could understand [toy snatching] is developmentally appropriate. It would make them less stressed out when their kid inevitably refuses to share.”

Another staple of childhood manners that counteracts empathy is forcing children to apologize. We’ve all heard the insincere “Sorry,” which Shannon Nagy, director of the Co-op, says can sometimes seem like a get-out-of-jail-free card. Instead, she says, after all injured parties have been comforted, teachers will say, “Look at her face, look how upset she is! Tell me what happened.” If the child really needs some sort of verbal consolation, a promise to not do it again is extracted, but otherwise, says Nagy, she wants remorse to come from a real place. “We want it to be concrete,” she says.

Empathy and discipline

My son is at an age where he is really into “good guys” and “bad guys,” those who follow the rules and those who don’t. He once told me with deep seriousness about how his friend was not throwing away his yogurt container and was making “the earth sick.” So does teaching empathy for the litterbug then imply that rules are meant to be broken?

No, says Harvard’s Feigenberg. I can still teach that littering is wrong, but “that doesn’t mean that people who litter are bad people,” she says. I can still tell my son that littering is not the behavior we want to have in the world, but then, she says, he and I can “think about the circumstances that may have led to that, or ways we could change those circumstances in the future,” perhaps if we note something fixable, like a dearth of garbage cans in the park.

There are rules—brainstormed by the class at large—at the Lincoln Park Co-op. And sometimes those rules get broken. Cleaning time, for instance, often goes south, at which point Boshans will stop cleanup time and call the children. “I will say, ‘We have a big problem: The teachers are doing all this cleanup. It’s not fair, I don’t want to clean up all the toys, it’s taking too long, and we’re not going to have time for snack. What are we going to do?’ ” By putting it on the students and making them ponder, What is fair? What is right? the students learn ownership as well as natural consequences. Children learn nothing from a punishment like “You didn’t clean up, now you’re going to time-out,” as opposed to the lesson imparted by “You guys didn’t clean up, and now we don’t have time for a story. Darn, I hope we do better tomorrow.”

Selective praise and punishment

It may seem counterintuitive, but when children do begin to exhibit empathy, resist the urge to pour praise all over them—or at the very least, watch how you phrase it. Feigenberg recommends saying something like, “That was really kind of you to help out your classmate,” as opposed to saying “Good job! You’re such a good person.” Studies have shown, she says, that “when you identify the behavior you’re seeing, kids are more likely to do that again, and not make it about themselves.”

Kohn believes that too much praise belies a suspicion that children will never behave kindly on their own. “That assumes that nice action was a fluke and it would never happen again without an artificial inducement,” he says. I admitted to him that the idea of not saying anything if I noticed my son thinking about others sounded difficult. In that case, he says, I could simply notice what I saw my child do or ask him a question about it. For instance: “I know you really like peanut butter squares, but you gave Diane one of yours. How did you decide to do that?” Kohn says, “You might gently invite him to notice how happy it made Diane. That’s completely different from praise.” Praise, he says, would be about how I felt about my son’s behavior, “which leads kids to be less interested in the well-being of others than getting that reaction from Mommy.”

Kohn also believes parents should rethink discipline. Instead of sending a child to time-out or spanking him after he misbehaves, redirect his perspective: “Remember when you were running down the stairs and you hurt your knee and you were crying? I’m afraid that’s how you made Steven feel with what you did to him. How do you think you could make him feel better?” In that scenario, says Kohn, the child is thinking about how his action affected his friend, “and you leave some power in his hands by inviting him to reflect on how to repair the damage.” If we rely too heavily on rewards and punishment, Kohn believes, we teach children that the reason not to hurt is because of what will happen to them. “We don’t want to teach kids that hurting and hitting are wrong, we want to teach them why hurting and hitting are wrong.”

Don’t skip over sadness

I admit, there are certain times in a parent’s life when your child’s sadness is terribly inconvenient, like, say, when you’re leaving the house Monday morning at 7:45 and he’s upset there are no Fig Newtons in the house and P.S. there haven’t been Fig Newtons in the house for months, so why is this a thing now? It’s awfully tempting to say, “You’re not sad. We’re in a hurry, let’s go.”

But Boshans says that children being in touch with their feelings is key to understanding others' feelings. At school, she says, "If a kid gets sad because another kid is painting and they want to paint, we don't say, 'Oh, it's fine! You're not sad! We have a hundred other toys here!' then we're not validating their emotional experience." Instead, teachers mirror the students' emotions. "Yeah, you're sad because you want to paint." Later, if that child is painting and someone else is waiting, she says, they are more likely to think, "I bet they felt the way I felt when I was waiting. I'm going to hurry up because I know it feels bad to wait."

Don't skip past opportunities to discuss tough experiences. If your child tells a story about how Becky didn't sit next to him at school, don't find ways to downplay it in order to avoid having your child dwell on sad feelings. "It's OK to say 'I would be sad if I couldn't sit with my friend,'" Nagy says. "Let them know it's OK to not always be OK." While Nagy says parents often wonder if it's indulgent to get into long conversations with their children about their emotions, instead, she says, "It's saying I'm teaching you to be a reflective person." Perhaps the next day back at school, she says, "When Becky wants to sit next to you, instead of wanting to get her back, I'm remembering how bad that felt, I'm going to say yes."

While empathy is an idealized character trait, it often materializes after some tough encounters, which parents shouldn't fear. Boshans says, "In order to become empathetic, we have to see the world as a fuller place. While we love our children's innocence, we can't keep their innocence intact forever." The fact that kids are coming to parents, Boshans says, asking for help comprehending the world, is "such a good sign."

Model it at home

Instead of waiting for opportunities to discuss empathy to arise, Feigenberg says that adults need to lead the way in terms of demonstrating the type of behavior we hope to see. "One example we talk about at Making Caring Common is when kids come home from school, parents ask questions like 'What did you do? What'd you learn?'" Instead, she says, parents can incorporate questions like "Who did you sit with at lunch? Did you help someone today? Did you make your classroom better today?" This, she says, shows kids that you think these things matter enough to ask.

We all slip up once in awhile, and it's important to own that. "We all do things that we wish we could have done differently even if there was no malintent," Feigenberg says. These are excellent learning opportunities. "We should be having conversations with kids around the impact of our words on other people. **"As a parent, it's a really amazing opportunity to be**

able to reflect, reconnect, and repair with kids." She gives as an example: "When I yelled at you this morning, I was really frustrated and we were running late for school and I lost my patience and I'm sorry. Let's talk about how we can do things different in the morning so we all feel less stressed out." An apology like that, she says, is a powerful message for kids. "You don't have to do everything exactly right all the time. You can go back and talk about it and find ways to reconnect and move forward."

Additionally, says Boshans, it's important to make children feel like they are part of the family. She recommends incorporating family meetings into a family's routine to let kids know that they are active participants in the family and that not everything comes from the parents. Sitting down with children to say, "Mom and Dad are sick of being the only ones that empty the dishwasher. What should we do to make this fair?" she says, "gives kids the opportunity to make decisions in the context of the family."

To that end, children's allowance should not be tied to their household chores. "That's saying you get paid to do this thing," says Nagy. Instead, parents should model housework the way the Co-op does their preschool classroom, in the context of a community. "As a family we're responsible for making our household run smoothly. You unload the dishwasher or set the table because you're a member of our family; we work together to spend time together."

Practicing grace

Finally, remember that empathy is absolutely in line with faith. "Even if we're very concerned with adhering to traditional Catholic teaching," says Traina, the religion professor, "we must affirm that everyone else out there is in some way on the path to the divine and participates in God's wisdom." The everyday people we interact with—whether they're nonbelievers or adherents to a different faith than ours, "still have not lost that connection." In the Catholic faith, she says, there is an assumption that everyone I encounter has access to some basic understanding of the good and some basic desire to seek the good. It may be buried under layers of difficulty, but there is no person who lacks that. There is no person with whom I cannot connect with on that level. That is empathy.

In a world where ideas like "political correctness" and "safe spaces" are widely debated and criticized, it's important to remember that making an empathetic human being is simply better for the community we're trying to build for our children. "If happiness and individual success are the only goals, then we end up in a world where everybody is just looking out for himself or herself," says Feigenberg. Empathy, she says, helps

build a “community that relies on each other and takes care of each other. It makes for stronger people, not softer people.”

And it’s never too early to start, says Nagy. “We think of guidance and discipline as a lifelong process. We’re not going to create empathy for kids by the time they leave [preschool]. The hope is that by developing empathy they will follow the golden rule and treat other people as they wish to be treated.”

*My son’s teacher, Agnes Lutow, has taught both at public and Catholic schools, and she says her students with strong religious roots show great capacity for empathy. To her, secular books like *A Wrinkled Heart* and religious teachings on kindness aren’t at odds but complement each other.*

“The fact that we are able to talk about God and his love for us in school helps with teaching empathy,” she says. “We teach our students to have love and compassion for others, just as Jesus did.”

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If you think this article might be helpful to other parents with children, please pass it along.

Reflection questions: What spoke to you most in this article? Was there anything you didn’t agree with?

Have a blessed week,

