

THE STRAITS TIMES



Man gets 2 years' jail, 3 strokes of ...



New \$50 million Seletar Airport



5 things you can PARKROYAL

Recommended by

Don't forget the E word



🕒 PUBLISHED OCT 12, 2015, 5:00 AM SGT

Empathy is trending as a must-have trait in today's fluid global economy, but we parents still seem more concerned about our kids doing well than doing good



Tee Hun Ching (mailto:hunching@sph.com.sg)

"A group of older boys made fun of me in school today," my son shared recently.

It turned out to be a minor incident with a major lesson.

He was trying to open a packet of food in the canteen with a pair of scissors from a vendor, not realising that the tool was dirty.

"The boys laughed and called me names like 'rotten boy'."

I was all set to soothe his hurt feelings, but he didn't seem very affected. Then came the crux of the story.



ST
ILLUSTRATION:
CHNG CHOON
HIONG

Kids need lots of practice to master empathy. It could be getting them to say a quick prayer for whoever is or will be in the ambulance whizzing past, having them do at least one helpful thing for someone every day, or telling them about a conflict or disaster in the news and have them talk about what those affected might be going through.



"One of the boys was very nice. He asked if I was okay and opened the packet for me, even though his friends laughed at him too," my son recounted. "I was very grateful."

That day, my eight-year-old experienced the transformative power of empathy: A simple act of kindness had taken the sting out of an unpleasant encounter and turned it into a positive memory.

Better yet, he was now inspired to pay it forward.

"I will help if I see other kids in trouble next time," he said.

I hope he keeps his promise, for while we all have the capacity for empathy, it does not always trigger an automatic response.

Like a skill or muscle, the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and then, more crucially, act with compassion, needs to be honed and trained before it can become a reflex.

Around the world, there is a growing call to foster empathy among the young. Advocates point to how this building block of human relationships affects not only social change, but also determines career success in a fluid, fast-paced global economy that demands open collaboration.

In a 2013 interview, American visionary Bill Drayton, who is credited with coining the term "social entrepreneur", urged: "We have to teach empathy as we do literacy."

He is the founder and chief executive of Ashoka, a non-profit organisation that has built up a 3,000-strong network of top social entrepreneurs in 70 countries.

Among its programmes is the Empathy Initiative, which aims to nurture and advance the soft skill in schools and communities.

Harvard Graduate School of Education has a similar project called Making Caring Common, which develops strategies to help parents, educators and communities raise caring and ethical children in a bid to make kindness a way of life.

Then last month, cultural thinker and writer Roman Krznaric launched Empathy Museum, the world's first museum devoted to helping people see things from someone else's perspective.

Held as part of London's annual Totally Thames Festival, its first installation was titled A Mile In My Shoes. The interactive shoe shop fitted visitors with shoes from strangers - a refugee or a banker, say - and then had them traipse around in the unfamiliar footwear while listening to the personal stories of these people.

The travelling exhibit will include new experiences as it evolves and plans to show in Perth, Australia, next year.

Even Facebook is working on an "empathy" button as an alternative to its "Like" icon, so people can express sympathy at bad or sad news with one click.

Mr Krznaric, however, was not impressed. Arguing that there is no shortcut to empathy, he wrote in The Guardian last month that the essence of the trait is "to convert our emotional reaction into a meaningful act of social change".

Empathy is what makes us human, and the desire to inculcate it is not new, of course. The Golden Rule of treating others as you would want others to treat you is promoted by most, if not all, major religions and ethics courses.

But in today's hyper-individualistic world, empathy is an increasingly vital antidote, Mr Krznaric said.

"Our failure to appreciate other people's viewpoints, experiences and feelings is at the root of prejudice, conflict and inequality," said the London-based author, who released the book *Empathy: Why It Matters, And How To Get It* last year.

While we all say we want our kids to do good, in reality, we seem more preoccupied with them doing well.

In one of its studies, Making Caring Common found that the bulk of today's young appear to value aspects of personal success, such as achievement and happiness, over concern for others.

About two-thirds of them also reported that their parents would rank achievement above caring for others. This, said the authors of the study, showed that the children's values reflected what they believe adults value.

The issue is not that the values of caring or fairness have disappeared, they concluded. But these "appear in too many circumstances to be subordinated to personal interests such as achievement and happiness".

I know just what they mean. When picking my son up from school, for instance, my questions reflect the same priorities. I would usually ask: "How was your day?" or "How did the test go?"

Rarely do I think to ask: "Who did you help today?"

It is not hard for my son and his five-year-old sister to perform acts of kindness for close friends and family members.

After learning recently that their father often had to skip lunch because of his hectic work days, they drew up a list of snacks that he could take with him to the office to relieve his hunger pangs.

So for the last two weeks, my husband has come home from work every night to find packets of crackers, M&Ms and muesli bars on the dining table, complete with sweet notes from them.

But it takes a lot more work to tune them to the needs of those outside their immediate circle. For instance, even simple gestures such as holding the door for strangers or thanking others when they do so for us require constant prompting and reminding.

Experts say this "zooming out" is important, to help kids expand their circle of concerns and grasp that the world does not revolve around them or their needs.

Kids need lots of practice to master empathy. It could be getting them to say a quick prayer for whoever is or will be in the ambulance whizzing past, having them do at least one helpful thing for someone every day, or telling them about a conflict or disaster in the news and have them talk about what those affected might be going through.

Ultimately, the buck stops with us parents. If we don't model kindness and compassion and make caring for others a priority, chances are, neither will our children.

To my son, the boy who went to his aid in the canteen will always be his hero. Me, I would love to meet his parents to tell them what a great job they've done with their son.

The Making Caring Common website carries a parenting quiz, titled *Are You Teaching Your Child To Be A Good Person?*, with various scenarios designed to reveal how likely we are to walk the talk.

The model answers to the 15 questions are patently obvious. But it is unlikely most of us would score full marks, if we were to be honest.

I've modified one of the questions to suit Singapore's grades-obsessed context: What would make you more proud? A. Your child was named the top student; or B. Your child was named the most helpful student.

Your choice would be an indication of your priorities and how you are moulding your kid. What would it be?
