Walking alongside children as they form compassion

by Wendy Hinrichs Sanders

Two four-year-olds were playing Pizza Restaurant in the dramatic play area. One child was tripping over the untied strings on his apron. Another girl tied the apron strings for him, saying, “There you go.” — Theresa Rios

A child I was observing was sitting by another child whose head was hanging. “My child” put her arm around the child and said, “Qué pasa?” (“What is wrong?”) — Allison Pike

Freddie offered his own special toy to another child who was showing distress. — Julia Urias

Cali was putting a puzzle together. A friend sitting next to her was having trouble with her own puzzle. Cali said, “This goes here,” and went back to her own puzzle. — Connie Vargas

These are typical day-to-day expressions of compassion among preschoolers. Do we make the most of these opportunities to facilitate compassion?

The affluence in the United States in the recent past has made it tempting to indulge children in individual achievement within a culture of abundance. Parents and teachers worry over how to teach compassion in a culture of abundance and competition for personal success, where children’s time is over-scheduled and they are geographically dispersed from their extended families.

Recent economic impacts have fundamentally changed our way of living. Children are involved in conversations about neighbors who have lost their jobs, their homes, and those who have lost their sense of dignity.

I conducted research over the past three years in focus groups with children 7 to 11 years of age about the dimensions of compassion. I believe others’ emerging research and children’s comments inform our early childhood practice. Two key concepts stand out for me.

First is innate compassion. We recognize that compassion is shown early in life, suggesting to neuroscientists it may be innate:

- Empathy is a core emotion that triggers creative problem-solving (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2008).
- Acts of compassion occur by at least 12 months of age (Thompson, 2008; Tomasello 2009).
- Young children express a deep connectedness to others and the divine, but learn to suppress those ideas by their school-age years (Hay & Nye, 2006).

Second, we know that relationships and experiences influence compassion. Children named both relationships and experiences during their early childhood years as influences toward compassion.

- Children showed themselves to be keen observers. They named their parents and peers as compassion exemplars, people who exemplified integrity compassionately. Stories ranged from a dad who gave his coat to another, a mom who bought lunch for a homeless family, to a mom who fundraised for children’s charities.
- Children recounted experiences observing and receiving compassion on the playground, in their community, and towards children in need around the world.

Compassion in ECE programs

Here is a simple schematic integrating what children named about learning to act with compassion with emerging research (Wolfe, 2001; Immordino-Yang et al., 2009; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2006).
We see four parts in this schematic: Readiness, recognize, respond, and rehearse.

**Readiness**

Create an environment of emotional safety. Nurture what children feel, and offer teaching practices that enable compassion. Significant relationship elements are captured by these labels:

- Commitment, trust, and emotional safety
- Guidance that exudes encouragement and forgiveness rather than shame and punishment
- Empowerment to contribute (Balswick, King & Reimer, 2005).

We know, from research on program quality and from national accreditation programs and standards, that an emotionally safe environment includes the following elements:

- Consistent, well-trained caregivers/teachers are attuned to children
- A predictable routine offers safety to focus on activities and others
- Extended periods of play enable children to delve deeply into problem solving, including the needs of others (part-day programs need at least one solid hour; more is better)
- Teachers model dignity and respect toward colleagues, children, and families so children see an alignment of beliefs and behaviors
- Small group activities enable children to attend to each other rather than compete
- Large group activities, such as music and movement, create community and foster relationships

Valuing and modeling authentic compassion is an important part of this work. We need to talk with children about empathy for others, their community, and their world. We share stories, certainly in humility, about what we, as well as others, can do to help those in need. Here are strategies we can use to model compassion with children:

- Walk alongside children as learners. Acknowledge the contributions children make to their own learning. One child suggested to me that adults should buy less and give more to others in need. Teaching is a humble walking alongside of — not a doing to — children.
- Offer children’s literature that demonstrates naturally occurring physical, social, and spiritual needs and opportunities to respond with compassion. Classic children’s literature often includes a need and a response. When you reflect, ask children:
  - What did he or she need?
  - How could you tell?
  If you were a part of the story, how might you offer compassion? (see suggested examples “Compassion Classics” at www.ChildCareExchange.com)
- Suggest themes that involve a need and an opportunity for compassion as a part of naturally occurring play. When you step into the dramatic play, block, or art area, expand or enhance children’s play by offering a slant on the play theme:
  “My Grandma is preparing food baskets to take to those in need. I think I’ll help her by buying some canned goods at your grocery store.”

  If the children pick up on it, fine; if not, let it go. Be suggestive, not burdensome. Children need fanciful play as well as gentle, occasional hints of social justice.

Dramatic play themes of airport, animal shelter, bank, baby-doll washing, camping, construction, doctor, dentist, fire station, hospital, journalist/newspaper, mechanic, veterinarian, and zookeeper all involve rich opportunities for compassion.

**Recognize**

Help children recognize the needs of others. Children express empathy very early. We can help children validate and expand that emotional cue.

- Help children be mindful of their setting, the context, and those around them. There is a great little book from England about children’s worship entitled Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There (Stone, 1995). We need to help children pause and be aware. For example, when I showed children photos of children in trouble — from a child falling off a bike to a homeless child — they described the emotions they saw on the child’s face, what they thought the child needed, and how they might help.
When we walk alongside children and build upon their ideas, we can help them with incidental, day-to-day acts of compassion and special projects.

Help children name their emotions. Children benefit from rich emotional literacy: “Chase, you seem sad that Liam won’t play with you. Is that how you are feeling or am I misunderstanding what I read on your face?”

Validate children’s understanding of the emotions of others.
- We help children value their emotional triggers when we help children name physical needs: “How could you tell Malachi was hurt?”
- We can use words about social needs: “It looks to me like Timmy would like to play with you in the block area. What do you think?”
- We can help children name spiritual needs: “Starla, what do you think is important to Damian right now? How can you tell?”

Respond
Empower children to respond with compassion. When we walk alongside children and build upon their ideas, we can help them with incidental, day-to-day acts of compassion and special projects. Children want to contribute. In my research they spoke of helping, giving comfort, and praying for those in need.

- Name ways children show compassion: “McKayla, I see you are helping Lamont pick up the pieces of his puzzle that fell on the ground.” Be careful to validate rather than reward.
- Expand children’s ideas of ways to help those in need. For example, one set of teachers discussed a child’s idea to gather food for an animal shelter, and the school as a whole adopted the project.
- Help children who might be ‘stuck’ to solve problems. For example, one six-year-old girl said she had heard about children being sold as slaves and cried herself to sleep. She decided to sell lollipops at basketball games to raise money to free a child. We can protect children’s vulnerability by being there to help them problem-solve.
- Plan ways to engage children in acts of compassion. Sample projects include bringing in clothes for children who are homeless or abused, serving meals at a homeless shelter, or conducting a winter coat exchange. One group of children adopted the elderly in a nearby retirement home and sent letters and pictures to cheer them. One teacher talked about sending prayers on the wind to children in need around the world.
- Anticipate compassion towards ‘difficult’ others. Children were sincere in saying that it is more difficult to help those who are mean-spirited or bullies. Children also expressed a vast well of forgiveness to make things right: Maybe those who were mean were most in need of compassion and it might inspire them to act with compassion to others.

Rehearse
Recall and expand acts of compassion. Children I met were very interested sharing their experiences. Children often seem hungry to be heard. Our conversations are most helpful when children do most of the talking and adults merely help them bridge from where they are to where they might go with their ideas.

- Reflect on problem solving. Recall with children how they figured out the person’s needs and an appropriate response. For example, one boy shared how giving a suitcase of clothes and food to a homeless person would help the man. Some children expressed concern that money gifts would be used wisely. Another child offered that sharing lunch is a way to help a hungry person.
- Recall how children felt after acting with compassion. Ask children to reflect on what they saw, how they felt, and what they want to do next. Children told me they suffered along with the person in need. They also felt satisfied that it seemed the right thing to do and they used words that expressed a sense of integrity: It is good and right to act with compassion.
- Expand one act to other contexts and explore different acts to help. For example, one child talked about giving all the toys he had outgrown to a neighbor who had none. Another child picked up on the idea and talked about giving his toys to a homeless shelter. Children might collect clothes for those in need from the earthquake in Haiti. What can they do to help someone nearby as well? One girl gathered toys and clothes to give to a classmate who was homeless.
- Address the tougher, deeper questions: “What could we do to help that child find a home?”

Help children evaluate their acts. Did you help or give comfort in a way that showed respect for the other person? How would you have felt if you were that person? Can you think of other ways you might respond if you saw that need again?

We can help children sustain a habit of compassion by suggesting opportunities to receive and offer compassion within the context of meaningful relationships in which children feel safe to recognize needs, problem solve to meet the needs, and reflect on what hap-
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Ryan Hreljac of Ontario, Canada was six years old when he learned from his teacher that children in Africa were dying because of unsafe drinking water. He was determined to raise the money to build a well. He did that and to this day, at 19, he continues his nonprofit foundation, Ryan’s Well, to raise millions of dollars to aid communities. His story is inspiring and uplifting for those of us who teach, as well as for young children.

Ryan’s compassion fills me with awe. After speaking with children over the years, I am filled with wonder and admiration by their commitment to act. May we all strive to be the kind of teachers who both inspire children as Ryan’s teacher did, and walk alongside them as they contribute, child by child, to make our world a more compassionate one.

References


Download the author’s list of “Compassion Classics” from the Free Resource list: www.childcareexchange.com/resources/free_resources.php

Compass Curricular Resources

• California Preschool Instructional Network: Hosts the California Early Learning Foundations. Volume One includes social and emotional foundations for preschoolers and infants/toddlers: www.cpin.us

• California Infant/Toddler Learning Foundations, including social-emotional development, are hosted on WestEd’s web site: www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/988

• The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) is funded by the National Office of Head Start to focus on the link between social and emotional development and school readiness and offers extensive materials for trainers, teachers, and families based upon a pyramid that has high-quality early childhood programming as its base: www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/

• Susan Usha Dermond, Calm and Compassionate Children: A Handbook (2007, Celestial Arts). Dermond writes from her experiences as principal of Living Wisdom School in Portland about creating a calm environment with children that enables compassion. While focused on elementary children, the concepts about teaching style can be used also with younger age groups: www.susandermond.com/Home_Page.html

• The Inner Kids Foundation has rich materials and connecting opportunities to teach mindfulness to children based upon neuroscience understandings: www.innerkids.org/Inner_Kids_Foundation/Welcome.html