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TOOLS FOR YOUR CHILD'S SUCCESS

Empathizing With a Bigger World in Your Own Backyard: How Parents Can Support a Child's Growing Social Awareness

Isabella's eleven-year-old son, James, walked in their door after school. He threw his backpack across the room and ran down the hallway to his bedroom clearly upset. When Isabella knocked, he simply said, "Go away."

Isabella waited until James finally emerged, hungry for a snack. As he searched the kitchen, she asked, "Are you okay?" James sat down with a bag of chips and explained that he was "sick of school," or more accurately, the students he encountered. One of his long-time friends, Dakota, had been hurt by some of their supposed friends today, and he felt angry and helpless to do anything. James loved hanging out at Dakota's house and getting to know his family - his father, a Native American of Crow ancestry and his mother, a Latina-American, both of whom grew up in Montana. Frequently he would catch his "friends" labeling Dakota. They had hung out with the same group since kindergarten, but now those "friends" were making fun of Dakota because his mother would speak to him in Spanish. He had attempted to befriend some others who labeled him "the Mexican," when his family had no heritage from Mexico whatsoever.

Today felt like the last straw for James when he had watched Dakota fight back tears at their lockers after the group had insultingly mimicked his mother's Spanish. Not only was he mad at the others, but he felt sick about his own role. "I know I should have stopped them, but I just stood there; I didn't do anything," James told his Mom frustrated with himself. "Why didn't I stop them?" he uttered to himself. Why couldn't classmates just take Dakota for who he was, a devoted student and good friend?

Clearly, the group of friends involved in labeling Dakota were struggling with social awareness and not accepting Dakota for who he was. And James, though feeling empathy for his friend, struggled to take action. He too was trying to figure out how to respond when others were unfairly treating a friend. From birth, our children are growing and exercising their social awareness, defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as "the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures and the ability

to understand the social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports."

CASEL recently further defined social awareness through the lens of equity. Children and teens are more likely to learn to empathize when adults accept and value cultural differences and discuss power dynamics that disadvantage some and advantage others. If we don't discuss these issues with our children, we can perpetuate old stereotypes and limit growing social awareness skills.

Social awareness also includes recognizing shared interests and life circumstances. Dakota was a classmate, a friend, played on a sports team, and loved his pet dog just like nearly every other child in his class. His classmates' mistaken interpretation of his heritage and what that meant about his identity were separating him out and hurting him and his friend.

Growing our children's social awareness poses a number of challenges for the adults who love them. First, if we are to prepare our children for contributing to our global community, we have to recognize and admit bias. We must challenge our own thinking as we raise important questions for our children to consider. This puts us in the uncomfortable position of not knowing it all. Yet, that model of vulnerability, of standing in the face of challenge and admitting we have much to learn, will aid us considerably with our next challenge.

As our children develop greater social awareness, their social anxiety rises in direct proportion. Why? As our children work to exercise their perspective-taking muscle, they make wrong interpretations about others' thoughts and feelings. After all, we are not born mind readers. Empathy requires practice. In the preteen years, feelings of heightened sensitivity complicate this as children's brains and bodies are dramatically changing. The preteen through teen years can feel isolating as our children become increasingly anxious about their peers' potential criticisms of who they are. Our opportunity to show vulnerability will not only model what our children are experiencing — "It's okay not to know it all" — but also open the door to a more trusting connection where parent and teen can wrestle with the tough questions together.

There are a number of ways we can help our children and teens become more socially aware. Here are some specific ideas.

3-to-5-Year-Olds

Practice Physical Awareness.

Our young children are working hard to figure out how their bodies can cooperate with the hopes of their minds and hearts. Through pretend play, they work on their fine and gross motor skills. They are interested in learning about their own body parts and curious about others. This is an ideal time to practice body awareness. For example, play the game "What does your body tell you? What do others' bodies tell you?" According to The Definitive Book of Body Language, body language is five times more powerful than words! Work on identifying facial expressions, body postures, and ways of moving that communicate emotion. This focus will assist a child in noticing nonverbal cues from others.

Discuss race, culture, differences, and commonalities. Use children's books to spur conversation.

Because children are more regularly engaging in play with others, this is an ideal time to talk about differences and commonalities. There are people with a variety of skin colors, different beliefs about a higher power, and a range of traditions around the world. What can we learn from those differences? And, how many commonalities can we discover? Be sure to seek common ground as there is always more that unites us than divides us. Also, practice acting with kindness and inclusion. Model bringing others in the circle of play who were not naturally there. The seeds of exclusion can be planted at this stage; it's critical that we offer children the chance to practice inclusion.

6-to-8-Year-Olds

Act as a Feelings Detective.

Children require practice in naming emotions in order to manage them and grow a sense of empathy for others. Create a dinnertime game to discover what Dad is feeling when we ask him, "How was your day?" Use errand runs to see if you can figure out what people are feeling through their facial expressions. When your child comes home and tells a story about classmates, ask the question: "How do you think they were feeling?" These simple games will simultaneously promote valuable self-awareness, self-management (name it to tame it), and social awareness skills.

Advance your conversations on inclusion and equity.

Your child may be encountering children from other cultures, races, and abilities for the first time as they enter elementary school. Make a point of discussing race, culture, and differing beliefs and abilities whenever the topic may arise. Equate "different" with "an opportunity to learn and value" versus "weird." At the beginning of each school year, you might ask: "How would you feel in a new school where you didn't know anyone? Can we come up with ways that you could welcome the new students and help them feel comfortable?"

9-to-12-Year-Olds

Prepare With Peer Tools.

How do you coach your child when they encounter mean words or actions at school? Consider offering your child some simple ways to stop harm without causing more and move to safety. You might practice together saying, "Stop. You know that's wrong (or unkind)," and then walk away. Isabella could have coached her son to help his friend, Dakota, by agreeing to walk him away when verbally attacked. Did you know more than half of bullying attempts stop when another child intervenes? Agree with friends to help one another stay safe. Then, express compassion: "You know when someone is lashing out, they are hurting inside." Criticizing other children may put your child in harm's way. Instead, how can you express empathy and compassion while keeping your child safe?

Share stories of fairness and justice.

Children at this age are keenly attuned to issues of fairness. Build on this rising insight by discussing the complexities of acting in just ways. When friends make poor choices, ask "What other choice did they have? How would those choices have resulted in different outcomes?" Point out ways in the larger world that individuals and cultures struggle for rights and talk together about ideas to solve those big problems. Read age-appropriate biographies together about Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, or Rosa Parks to learn about those who risked their lives for justice.

For 13-to-18-Year-Olds

Engage in Powerful Conversations.

Teens are ready to engage in powerful conversations about more complex issues. Movies, social media, and everyday experiences provide opportunities to practice empathizing. Asking your teen questions like: "What would it be like to be in someone else's situation? How would you have reacted if you had been them?" Or "Have you seen examples of people being mistreated because of their race, ethnicity, or other differences? How did that make you feel? What could you do about it?"

Practicing social awareness with your child is a meaningful contribution to our next generation. Offering your child access to your own open mind and grappling with some of our world's toughest issues of fairness and justice together will strengthen yours and your child's empathy and compassion. You may just change the world for the better in your own backyard.

About The Author:

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