



Super Kids: Tips for Teaching Empathy

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Annahid: Hello, this is Annahid Dashtgard. Welcome to *Breaking the Ocean Podcast: Soundwaves of Belonging*.

Annahid: At the beginning of the school year I've been thinking about what are some ways that we can more proactively and consciously raise inclusive and empathic children. Children that model with empathy, not just feels like, but looks like in practice, the kind of kids that we need in a society that's growing increasingly polarized, where the future reality is going to be one that will call on people that can be bridge builders, gap crossers, cultural translators, and it starts really early on.



I guess the first thing I'd say is this. A lot of us kinda can operate under the illusion that if we don't talk to our kids about difference then they're not gonna notice it. So thinking about race, I'm color blind, I don't see color, my child doesn't see color, they have a really diverse group of friends. It's something that I hear often. Unfortunately, as nice as that sounds it's neurologically not possible. On an unconscious level our brains are trained to recognize difference. Because you see, our brains are trained to make things as easy as possible, which means that we very early on learn to see the world in patterns.

By association, we see shoe and we associate it with foot. We see one thing and we associate it with another. This is why very early on biases ... Kids absorb biases, the most common association between different ideas at the unconscious level, so they very early on associate that women are more maternal or are supposed to be more sensitive or are supposed to be nice. That unconscious bias shows up in behavior, again, very early. I have my nieces who are half Nigerian, so are darker skinned. Very early on were receiving comments, as three, four years of age from their white classmates, "How come your hair is ... Why is your hair so curly? If you weren't so dark you'd be pretty." Not because of any malicious intent and not even necessarily because a child is hearing that out of the mouths of their parents, but because children absorb what they learn as normal from the society around them thought TV shows, ads, stories, story books, photos in the school hallways, things on the subway, all of that gets soaked into the brain and programs the brain without us being aware.



Breaking the Ocean Podcast: Soundwaves of Belonging

I'm surprised how still, in 2018, how hard it is to find shows that really showcase the diverse set of children. I think of Paw Patrol, which is a newer show coming out of Toronto, one of the most diverse cities on the planet, and how that show is a young, white boy with a group of pups and there's barely any other person of color in the entire show. Except the mayor who is a black woman, and unfortunately fulfills a stereotype of a woman that doesn't have her stuff together and is often laughed at and has this pet chicken that she's running after. I'm not gonna get into the number of stereotypes that that role enforces, but believe me, there is more than one. Kids soak that up and there's not so many options available to children.

The first thing in terms of teaching our children to really be inclusive in their behavior and leadership is that we have to offer as many diverse stories to them to counter the dominant story, the dominant biases that they're inheriting from the culture. So find the books that showcase protagonists or main characters that are racially diverse. Like Princess Boy, about a boy that loves dressing up in girls clothes. That showcase characters that have a physical disability or in a wheelchair, and not in a way that the story is about their difference, but story where they are just learning and doing something as any other child would and the difference is secondary, so our children get to learn about the world and good behavior and families through characters that are multifaceted. That we don't just pick up the books that have an Asian child on the front just to tell a story about Chinese new year. Asian kids can tell any story, just like any other racial character. But again, those stories are hard to find and I have found, even in Toronto, that I have to go 45 minutes across the city to a couple of book stores that I know of that have a range of books that really offer that diverse array of characters.

Part of this, I'm just gonna slip this in there, is that we can also be proactively lobbying our neighborhood book stores and toy stores and libraries to really not just carry those books, but also feature them.

The second thing is that role playing with children is a really positive thing to do. Getting our children to start to identify who in the class is having a hard time, perhaps is left out more often, maybe feels a little bit alone and what can our children do to bridge that gap. One of the things that's really helpful is giving children options. The more options children have in any given situation the more literate they will be in terms of ... Empathically literate, choosing the best choice that fits the situation at hand.

You might wanna choose a moment. For example, into my child's class, she was in kindergarten, a new family arrived, a Syrian refugee family and one of the children didn't speak English. I asked her, knowing this I asked her how this boy was doing and found out that he was having a little bit of a hard time here and there, so we chose one of the situations and we role played it. We took different roles, she was him and I was her, and then she was herself and I was the teacher and then ... We kinda triaged the roles and what the different options might be to really allow her to be able to step in



Breaking the Ocean Podcast: Soundwaves of Belonging

and support this little boy and be able to understand that maybe going to what he was feeling and what might it look like to show up ... One of the things when we're role playing is we wanna teach our children how to be allies, rather than superheroes. So it's not about swooping in and being the rescuer, but taking your cues from the child who's impacted and being a partner to them. That's an important thing to keep in mind.

I was thrilled, after having gone through that process with my girl, to hear at the parent-teacher interview that she was the only girl in the class that had ... They said, that showed such deep empathy and then went on to give these multiple examples of how she had supported this little boy, including can we write things down or draw pictures so that he can understand, which wasn't even something that she and I had talked about, she had thought that up on her own.

Thinking how do we cue our children, how do we talk them through some different options and role playing those things. And it does make a difference, because like anything what we pay attention to grows. What our children notice in themselves and in the classroom around them allows them to consciously develop skills in that direction.

And the last thing here is to praise in our children what we want them to develop. I try on a daily basis to notice and praise my children for their kindness and their thoughtfulness, and I tell them that I love them and we use different monikers for their superhero powers. For example, my daughter who's born in the Chinese year of the dragon, we talk about her dragon spirit. In certain situations when she's having a hard time, or I'm having a hard time, or both of us, "What would your dragon spirit do sweetheart?" Or my little boy who very early on loved superheroes, so I talk to him about Bat boy, being Bat boy, what would Bat boy do in this situation?

Finding ways to get our children to notice in themselves their capacities for kindness, for generosity, for being kinda the hero even in the face of difficult situations, is really great, because like any of us what we really recognize in ourself, number one, but also are taught to cherish, to recognize as a gift, we are more likely to act on, to develop that capacity.

Of course, I think all children come in with these particular gifts. Like many gifts, certainly in childhood, what we ... What is in their environment, what we're taught to pay attention to is what wires in our brain more strongly and then comes out in our behavior later on.

But it's never too late as well, because as of course with neuroplasticity and all of the research shows that it is never too late for us to change behavior with concentrated attention. Even for children that are older we can be consciously getting them to develop these kinds of practices.



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There are many different ways of explaining to our children why empathy, inclusiveness, allyship are important leadership practices. Find your own way, find a way of explaining it that makes sense in your own value system, in your own family, for the world. But the earlier we start, the better off for all of us.

Annahid: So I thought that I would ask my six year old daughter what her advice was. Arion, what do you think that people can do, what kids can do in the classroom to really help everybody feel like they're important and that they matter?

Arion: Help them learn about stuff and then they can help their other friends that don't know.

Annahid: But how can kids do that? What do you do to help everybody feel like they're important in the class?

Arion: I help them learn, because if someone doesn't know how to do something, then I just help them how hard I can try.

Annahid: What kinds of things do you do?

Arion: Today I was at school and I was helping my friend on the monkey bars, and he couldn't do it. So what I did for him was I helped him, I showed him how. Then when he knew how to do it I said, "Great job," and I clapped. And that's what's called helping someone that doesn't know how to do something.

Annahid: That's cool. I have one more question for you. Has anyone in your class ever done something to help you?

Arion: Oh. Today, I was at school.

Annahid: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Arion: And it was my first day.

Annahid: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Arion: I didn't know some rules and I made a mistake and I said, "Oh, no, I can't do this. I don't wanna get in trouble." Then someone said, "Everyone makes mistakes, it's okay. Sophie's not really a strict teacher, so you can go to her and ask her what you did and then tell her what you did and then you can start all over again and do that again."





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Annahid: Okay. This friend helped you think about the situation and helped you, reminded you that making a mistake is not such a bad thing and you can go and get help from the teacher?

Arion: Yeah.

Annahid: That's super cool. That's very cool. Anything your dragon spirit wants to say?

Arion: My spirit wants to say I've done a great job reporting on a radio show.

Annahid: That's awesome. Thank you.

Annahid: And now I'm going to ask my four year old son Koda a question as well. What do you think it means to belong somewhere, Koda?

Koda: I wanted to say...

Annahid: Yeah. What do you think it means to belong somewhere?

Koda: It depends on the health or help somebody if they fall and ...

Annahid: Do you look after other people?

Koda: Yes.

Annahid: Yeah. What helps you look after other people? Why do you think that's important?

Koda: 'Cause they help me sometimes.

Annahid: Yeah.

Koda: I did a radio.

Annahid: And there we have it. From the mouth of babes. Have a wonderful transition back to school. And may your children and your family have a wonderful, safe, happy and inclusive year.

