



Charity Really Does Begin at Home: Nurturing a Family Tradition of Giving

Youth will be helped to believe that they can cope, and that, if they work at it over a lifetime, they may leave a little corner of the world a bit better than they found it.

—ROBERT K. GREENLEAF

Children learn to give from a young age. It is delightful for a parent when a child starts to outgrow the self-absorption of infancy and starts to mimic caring behavior—hugs, kisses, pats on the back and other simple recognitions of others.

In his book *Raising a Child with a High EQ* (HarperPerennial, 1998), Lawrence Shapiro notes that most toddlers intuitively try to reduce another child's distress, although they aren't sure exactly what to do. By six, children have the ability to see things from another person's perspective and act accordingly.

Parents work hard to build on this natural empathy that all children are born with. Every family has its traditions and its own ways to teach children to respect the needs of others and do kind things. As a child gets older, parents' efforts to instill the value of caring grow with the child. Sharing with others becomes an important skill as children enter school. Children's worlds expand

in the school years, when they learn that there are many kinds of people and families in many kinds of communities.

When children approach high school, they begin to gain a fuller appreciation of the world and the social and economic problems many of us struggle with. They also start to form their own ideas about such issues and perhaps even develop an interest in a particular cause. With money of their own, they can make decisions about how to spend it.

This chapter will help you strengthen your own efforts to raise caring children during all of these stages of child and youth development. Children for whom “charity begins at home” have the world opened up for them.

Modeling the Values of Caring and Sharing

Ask almost any dedicated philanthropist the best way to impart philanthropic values to children and the answer likely to come back is “be a role model for them.” Kids need to know that it’s important to you that they are kind and giving. You teach them every time you talk to them about how to treat others and when you demonstrate compassionate behavior yourself.

Let your children see you give your time and talents. In her book *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* (HarperCollins, 1993), Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, recalls the message she received from her parents beginning in early childhood: “We learned that service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time.” Let your children witness your giving too. Establishing the habit of giving with a preschooler can be the beginning of a lifelong commitment to generosity. Children notice when you place money in a collection plate, for example. They may ask if they can have the honor too.

Besides modeling caring behavior, take the next step. Actively teach your children about giving and your philanthropic values. Try some of the activities suggested in the rest of the chapter to start your child’s philanthropic education.

Beginning the Discussion about Charitable Giving

The earliest lessons about giving have to be simple. For instance, if you buy a turkey for a needy family at Thanksgiving, explain that people who don't have enough money to buy things sometimes need our help. Explain the origin of the holiday too—that in 1621, Native Americans and Plymouth colonists gave thanks for a good harvest by joining together in an outdoor feast to which everyone contributed food.

Or the next time you're looking for a conversation-starter on a car trip, ask your kids, "If you had a million dollars to give away to deserving causes or people, whom would you give it to?" Be sure to ask the follow-up question, "Why?" You might learn a lot about your children's interests and concerns. After the kids have had turns, share some of your own thoughts about how you'd disburse such a sum. And if your family trip takes you to a scenic spot, talk about how important it is to protect the environment. If you tour a historic site supported by donations, explain to your children how the site is maintained.

activity

Find-Your-Talent Game

Adapted from *Teaching Children Responsibility* by Richard and Linda Eyre (Fireside, 1994).

1. With your children or any group of children, list each child's talents on a big sheet of paper.
2. Tell the kids to pick one of these talents and imagine the most wonderful use for it. For example, a child who is musical might be imagined as an adult on the stage at Carnegie Hall playing a benefit concert for a worthy cause.
3. As one person describes that scene, the others have to guess who is being discussed.

Remind your kids that, whether or not they have much money, they can use their talents to help people. Every family has stories of relatives who did something to serve the community—ran for office, headed the PTA, helped a neighbor, rallied for a cause. Tell those stories to your children so they understand that community involvement is part of your family's history. And when your kids talk about what they want to be when they grow up—a firefighter, for example—ask how they could help people if they had that kind of job, suggest Linda and Richard Eyre in their book *Teaching Children Responsibility* (Fireside, 1994). “Help your child see that the most important reason for choosing a particular career is that you can contribute something to others,” they advise.

Read Me a Story

Many children's books offer wonderful lessons about sharing and caring. The Aesop fable *The Lion and the Mouse* and the more contemporary *The Rainbow Fish*, by Marcus Pfister (North-South Books, 1992), are just two examples for younger children. Older children can appreciate stories about famous—and not-so-famous—philanthropists, social activists and extraordinary volunteers. See the Resources section at the end of this book for a few suggested titles. Your librarian should be able to recommend others.



TIP: Remember the story “Stone Soup”? At your next family or neighborhood gathering, try fixing a dinner by starting with a large pot, a clean stone and some water. Have each guest bring a contribution for the pot: vegetables, meat, spices, broth and so forth. Read the story aloud together and then involve everyone in preparing the meal. Younger children can decorate place mats, fold napkins and set the table. Older ones can cut up vegetables or bake biscuits to go with the stone soup.

activity**Story Discussion**

(Adapted from the Council of Michigan Foundations K–12 Education in Philanthropy Project)

Here's an example of how to explore the philanthropic theme of a storybook with your child:

Read the fable *The Lion and the Mouse*. You probably remember the story of the mouse who awakens a sleeping lion. The beast decides to let the mouse go and the mouse promises to do a favor for the lion. Later, when the lion is caught in a trap, the mouse gnaws the ropes to help him escape.

Then ask:

- Can you think of an example of when you have done something nice for another person?
- What is a trap?
- How did the mouse free the lion?
- Why couldn't the lion free himself?
- What lesson does the story convey? (Help your child relate the moral of the story to good citizenship. Ask about other kinds of good deeds citizens can do.)

Using the Media to Your Advantage

The media provide other opportunities for teaching children the value of philanthropy. For example, probably every preschooler has learned something about caring for others by watching *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Videos such as Disney's *The Fox and the Hound* show kids that differences can be overcome if people—or animals—truly care for one another. Older kids might take inspiration from renting the classic film *Lilies of the Field*, in which Sidney Poitier is conned into building a church for

destitute nuns. Watching television or movies with your kids and talking with them afterward about their reactions will enhance their experience.

Television can be another teaching tool. For example, although the news can be disturbing to children, it also can inspire them to help others. Legions of children were spurred to acts of compassion by the devastating images of the World Trade Center towers collapsing on Sept. 11, 2001. They held fundraisers to help the victims at home and sent dollars to the White House for the children of Afghanistan. Parents reported that their children were better able to cope when they could do something positive and not feel helpless.

Anthropologist Jane Goodall tells a story of a five-year-old who had learned of Goodall's work with orphan chimpanzees from a National Geographic television special. The girl, named Amber Mary, approached Goodall after a lecture in Florida, clutching a stuffed Snoopy dog in one hand and a small bag of pennies in the other. In the television documentary, one chimp dies from grief after losing his mother. Amber Mary knew something about grief

activity

Make a Helping-Others Scrapbook

Start a scrapbook and add to it periodically:

- Collect magazine articles, news stories, pictures and other items that show people being helped or needing help.
- Use a page to jot down favorite children's books with "helping" themes.
- Include a list of special things the children say or do to help others or give to others. Update the list occasionally.
- As your children get older, you can include a list of groups or places in the community that your family is interested in helping or places you have helped in the past and want to visit again.

because her own brother had died of leukemia the year before. By saving her allowance for weeks, she was able to buy the toy dog, and she asked Goodall to give it to one of the orphan chimps to keep it company at night. The extra pennies were for bananas.

Passing on Your Giving Values through Family Rituals

Children thrive on rituals. Family celebrations, for example, are prime opportunities to create philanthropic traditions. To honor a child's birthday you might plant a tree. For Mother's Day, help your children do a good deed for someone else's mother whose children can't be with her. Family reunions, Grandparents' Day or religious holidays can all be occasions to celebrate the spirit of giving.

Incorporating Cultural Traditions

Your family may already have established giving rituals based on your culture and those of others. Use those traditions to reinforce your message of giving. At some Chinese-American weddings, for example, the family of the groom presents a donation to a representative of a nonprofit community organization such as a hospital, school or senior center. Sometimes the parents of the bride match it. Jewish children often donate to charity a percentage of the money they receive on the occasion of their bar or bat mitzvahs. And African-American families who celebrate Kwanzaa sometimes recite a pledge written by author Maya Angelou: "We pledge to bind ourselves to one another, to embrace our lowliest, to educate our illiterate, to feed our starving, to clothe our ragged, to do all good things, knowing that we are more than the keeper of our brothers and sisters. We *are* our brothers and sisters."

Singer-songwriter and educator Buffy Sainte-Marie, founder of the Nihewan Foundation for American Indian Education, describes a Native American tradition called a Giveaway. "A Giveaway is usually held to share and acknowledge something good that has happened, such as improved health, harvest or the birth

story

Exposing Kids to Philanthropy at a Young Age

Larry Lowe, a third generation Chinese American, attends many fundraising dinners to support Chinese social service institutions in the San Francisco Bay area. He and his wife take along their young children to expose them to the need “to support the community from which you came.” In this way, he is passing on a family tradition. When he was young, his parents took him and his siblings to a large restaurant in Chinatown several times a year for fundraising dinners.

Lowe admits that these evenings were boring for kids and he didn't enjoy them, but he believes they had a lot to do with instilling the philanthropic values that he imparts today to his own kids. And he's working to make the fundraisers he's involved in more family-friendly and fun for the younger set.

of a child,” she explains. An individual or family calls friends and relatives together and presents them all with gifts. If the Giveaway is to honor a toddler or other child, the parents will hold the event on their child's behalf and enlist the child's help in passing out the gifts and greeting each recipient, thanking them for coming. “The Giveaway serves both a social function and an economic function,” Sainte-Marie adds. Besides being a fun occasion, “a Giveaway is one more Native American way to redistribute wealth, goods, services and happiness.”

Variations on Gift Giving

Gift-giving days and rituals are perfect opportunities to demonstrate your charitable values. Like many parents, Ellen Sloan of Santa Monica, California, worried that her young children

received too many presents at holiday times and birthdays. For her younger child's second birthday, Sloan threw a big party. Both of Sloan's children were adopted from China, so she suggested that the guests donate to a charity that cares for Chinese orphans, rather than purchase gifts for her child.

And when her oldest turned four, Sloan asked her daughter's friends to bring an unwrapped toy or book suitable for any age and either sex. The main party activity was making wrapping paper using finger painting, stamps and markers. Then the kids wrapped the gifts and Sloan took them to local free clinic to distribute to families in need. The kids had a great time and the clinic sent them thank-you letters. The birthday girl was content with the gifts she received from her family.



TIP: When you and your children buy gifts for friends and family, you can also help your favorite charities. Gift shops at your local zoo, aquarium or historic site, and catalogues from the Smithsonian Institution, UNICEF and many other groups, provide an array of gift items with proceeds going to support the organizations. Some websites will let your family designate a charity to receive a percentage of what you spend. Target, for example, has a plan that sends 1 percent to your child's school.

Planting the Seed

Children's interest in philanthropy may wax and wane through the years. A child who's very active in volunteer efforts and charitable giving in elementary or middle school may show less interest in high school, when homework, sports and social life take all his energies. It's common for one child in a family to be very philanthropic while another shows no interest at all. It's best to let all your children go at their own pace. Provide opportunities without pressure and tailor those opportunities to fit the interests of each child.

story

Donating in the Name of Others

John Davis of Springfield, Massachusetts, remembers that his grandmother didn't send Christmas and birthday presents to her grandchildren. She felt their parents had adequately provided for them. Instead, the grandkids received letters saying "You'll be happy to know I've sent a donation in your name to. . ." and listing the charity. "This stuck out in my mind," Davis recalls, and made him feel involved in helping needy people through his grandmother. "She had been an orphan and always had an interest in people who were having hard times," he says. Davis remembers that when she was 90, his grandmother was walking by a daycare center at a church and heard children "who sounded like angels." Soon after, she received a misdelivered milk bill intended for the center totaling \$500. She paid it. "She taught us by her example," Davis says.

It's also not unusual for young people to quietly absorb the lessons of youth but not to act on them until they become parents themselves. Just as children who attend religious services with their families may turn away from religion in early adulthood and then return when they have children of their own, so, too, young parents often want to set the example of compassion that their parents set for them.

As with most child-rearing matters, the more you push philanthropy, the more your children may resist. You can't force kids to have a philanthropic spirit. The best approach is to talk about caring and sharing, model those values in your own life and give them opportunities to participate when they are ready. If you do that, you'll have planted the seeds for the next generation of givers.