

## Developing Compassion in Children

Compassion is that deep awareness of the suffering of others and the desire to alleviate it. Not only does a person with strength in compassion shows empathy, he has also developed the inner desire to help others. Such a person would carry out acts of compassion that may be as simple as visiting and consoling the suffering or lending a hearing ear to someone who needs to let go of his or her negative feelings. A compassionate person is like a rock that others lean on when the going gets rough.

### How does one develop compassion?

1. Compassion begins with opening our eyes and looking at things around us.
2. Noticing if someone is sad or troubled.
3. Putting ourselves in the shoes of that person and asking ourselves how we would feel if this was happening to us.
4. Ask ourselves what kind of help we would need in this position to alleviate the suffering?
5. Then offering the same help to him, for example being a caring companion, listening when they want to talk about their problem, sharing our own experiences or just saying encouraging words to give them hope

The intent of this article is to provide tips to create in children the awareness of the virtues of empathy and compassion and to give examples of compassionate acts that children can emulate.

One of the best ways to help children understand a concept is through a story. The following is a story about compassion. You can use the given questions as a means of generating conversation on this virtue, deepening the child's knowledge and motivating his/her desire to practice compassion.

### A story about compassion

*Long ago, there lived in India a young boy by the name of Mohan.*

*One winter's night, Mohan's mother developed a high fever. She could not sleep and was feeling very restless. In the middle of that night, she felt thirsty and asked her son to fetch a glass of water. Mohan got up immediately and went to the kitchen to fetch the glass of water for his beloved mother.*

*To his dismay, he found the water pot empty. In those days there was no running water in the homes. One could not just turn on the tap in the house to obtain drinking water; they had to carry water from the well or spring for drinking and other daily uses.*

*Mohan was in a dilemma. Should he tell his mother that there was no water left in the pot and ask her to wait till morning when their cook would fetch water from the spring? It would mean that his mother would not be able to quench her thirst till the morning. Could Mohan bear seeing his mother suffer for so long? No, never!*

*So he left the house that cold night and went to the village spring to fetch water. He filled the pot with water and carried the heavy pot all the way back home. When he*

*reached the house, he quickly poured the water into a glass and brought it to his mother. However, when he entered her room, he found his mother fast asleep.*

*Mohan was again in a dilemma. Should he wake her mother up to drink or should he just let her sleep through? Well, Mohan decided not to wake her up. He sat in a chair by her bedside holding the glass of water with both hands to make sure he did not spill it.*

*When his mother woke up a while later, she found, to her great surprise, Mohan sitting by her bedside holding a glass of water in his hands. When Mohan saw that his mother was awake, he quickly handed the glass of water to her with much care. He said: "Sorry I was not able to give you the water earlier. I went to the well to get the water and was waiting for you to wake up so I could give it to you."*

*Mohan's mother drank the glass of water with gratitude and pride. She truly knew then how much her son loved her and was deeply moved by his compassionate acts.*

### **Questions:**

1. What were the compassionate acts that Mohan performed that winter's night when his mother was ill in bed?
2. Why did Mohan's mother drink the glass of water with gratitude and pride when Mohan handed it to her?

### **Scenarios for reflection, role play and discussion with children:**

In addition to stories, children enjoy simple role plays or discussion of real life scenarios. These activities help the child examine his own feeling about the virtue and deepen his understanding of it. Reflect on the following situations with your child or your students and discuss possible ways of showing compassion under the different circumstances.

1. There is a new student in your class from a different country and she is feeling awkward as she does not look the same in skin color as the other students in the class.
2. Mum looks very tired and has yet to wash the dishes heaped high in the kitchen sink at night.
3. Your younger sister seems bored and she has no one to play with.
4. A friend is sad because the teacher has just scolded her for her carelessness in her homework.
5. A dog in the neighborhood is tangled up in his leash.
6. You are sitting down when traveling in a bus and a pregnant lady just alighted is unable to find a seat.

### **Suggestions for short-term projects**

1. Visit the sick
2. Feed birds and fish in the park
3. Visit an orphanage and help to celebrate a birthday, watch a movie together, share a story, share some delicious food or teach them a song or a dance.
4. Offer free babysitting to a busy mother

### **Suggestions for long-term projects**

1. Arrange special outing in the nature and help children notice details such as a small ant carrying food and birds making nests
2. Keep a pet at home and allow your child to feed it, play with it, give it a bath, touch and care for it.
3. Allow your child to have his or her own pet plant in the garden or a flower pot. He or she will be responsible for watering it, using fertilizer, and exposing it to the sun.
4. With your child, regularly visit an old friend or relative. Discuss beforehand what help he or she might need. Involve your child to cook or clean for them
5. In class, the teacher can encourage the students who are strong in one subject to tutor the students who might need help.

Such activities not only help develop compassion in our children, they are also fun and could well become the most memorable moments in the lives of our children.

By: Foo Check Woo and Mozhdeh Mohajer  
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