

Selfish or selfless: Are we bringing up our children to be altruistic?

"The Home Front" is a column on parenting strategies, couples' challenges and other relationship issues by partners at Woodland Professional Associates in North Hampton. It appears every other Friday.

Stina was 14 when she decided to volunteer at a local nursing home. She was interested in getting to know the residents and learn about their lives. On her second day, she noticed an elderly man hunched over in a wheelchair, his eyes focused at the floor. In looking at him more closely, she realized he was Dr. Jones.

She knew Dr. Jones as far back as she could remember. Frequently, she and her sister baked cookies for visits to him and his wife. They had been retired for many years. Stina always enjoyed these visits and listening to their stories.

When Stina approached Dr. Jones, he perked up and was so pleased to see her. He shared with her how meaningful her visits were to him and his late wife. The homemade cookies and, most of all, the conversation gave him joy. Visiting them was one of many ways Stina's parents encouraged her to give of her time and talents. Stina worked at soup kitchens, ran fund-raisers, and helped the homeless.

Matt also grew up in a caring home. He was the focus of his parents' attention, and they worked to give him what he wanted. A few months before his 13th birthday, his grandmother discussed his plans. She recalled his last party and the abundance of gifts and money he received. She encouraged him to donate a small portion of his money to charity. Matt emphatically stated, "No." He wanted and claimed to need all the money. His grandmother was stunned and dismayed by his response.

Why were Matt and Stina different in their orientation to altruism? Stina learned to think about participation in her community by giving. Community involvement was an integral, yet balanced part of her development and home life. Matt's community involvement was more self-focused, with a heavy concentration on sports and lessons.

Why does it matter whether parents encourage their children to volunteer in the community? There are two major reasons. Children can learn they can make a positive difference in others' lives. Psycholog-

ically they can gain knowledge of diverse populations and gain empathy for different situations.

Children at an early age are capable of being altruistic. A recent study by Warneken and Tomasello in Germany demonstrates infants as young as 18 months have altruistic behavior. Researchers deduced humans have a natural tendency to be helpful and reported children in their study jumped to help very quickly and with little prompting.

In a 2005 study out of London, Professor Rushton showed genetics and the home environment influence social responsibility and altruism. Contrary to what we may think about gender differences, findings from this twin study concluded males were more genetically predisposed to being altruistic than females. The home upbringing was more influential for girls. Based on this information, researchers suggested parents may need to watch and guide daughters more closely.

Parents can influence the extent their children are altruistic. This is accomplished in the following ways:

Modeling: Parents can model altruism by volunteering in community activities. This can range from adult functions such as the PTO or family functions that include children, such as helping out in school activities, church functions, a nursing home, homeless shelter or soup kitchen.

Ordinary part of life: Parents can balance helpful activities within the overall family structure. This way, giving to others is more a norm of family life versus an exception.

Teach value: In most homes, parents determine what activities are worthy of participation. If they ascribe like value to altruistic endeavors and sports or other extracurricular activities, then children will learn to perceive them as having similar importance.

Demonstrate compassion: Parents can teach sensitivity and compassion. This enhances a child's awareness of society as a whole and enables children to be less fearful of people who are different. By exposing children to diverse populations, parents are preparing them to develop into responsible adults.

Altruism begins at home. If we return to the story of Matt, we can only hope his grandmother discussed her concerns with his parents. And that Matt's world begins to include others in need of his talents and/or gifts.

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THE HOMEFRONT



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