

HOW TO RAISE A KIND AND COMPASSIONATE CHILD

by Barbara Rosenberg, Ph.D.

HOW OFTEN CAN WE REMEMBER hearing someone referred to as a "mensch" when growing up? Being a mensch might mean someone who "does the right thing" or someone who is "kind and compassionate". As parents, who among us would not feel proud to have raised a child described in this way?

In their book, *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*, psychologists, Maurice Elias and Steven Tobias, define a "mensch" as a self-disciplined, responsible, and socially skilled child. According to the authors, one of the most critical jobs of parenting is to help children grow up to be socially skilled and emotionally healthy. They outline five principles of emotionally healthy parenting which serve as mutual goals for both parents and children. The five principles are 1) Be aware of one's own feelings and those of others; 2) Show empathy and understand others' points of view; 3) Regulate and cope positively with emotional and behavioral impulses; 4) Be positive goal- and plan-oriented and 5) Use positive skills in handling relationships.

Principles one and two relate to sensitivity towards feelings. Once children are able to recognize their feelings, they have a much better chance of controlling them. Likewise, awareness of others' feelings is important; knowing how someone else feels gives you a better chance of having a positive interaction with them. Empathy, the capacity to share in another's feelings is also an important part of developing sensitivity towards others. According to Judeo-Christian ethical principles, "Do not judge others until you stand in their shoes". For example, when siblings fight, if they are made aware that their brother or sister also feels sad or hurt, this may temper their anger.

Principle three, being able to cope positively with emotional impulses, has to do with learning to delay gratification or needs and expressing them appropriately. Immature adults and young children tend to view the world in terms of their own wants and needs. As children approach the age of seven or eight, they become better able to compromise and show tolerance towards others. When children become loud and challenging, negotiation, rather than yelling, is a positive coping mechanism that models self-control

for our children.

Principle four, being positively goal-oriented is also important when dealing with children's behavior. For example, if an adolescent has lied about where he was going, saying he was sleeping at a friend's house when instead he went to a rock concert, the parent's initial reaction may be to reprimand and ground him indefinitely. On the other hand, if a parent formulates a goal before reacting, perhaps to teach a child to be truthful and to communicate openly, a different form of action may be more effective. Grounding for extended periods often causes feelings of revenge and only encourages the child to be sneakier the next time. Also, it would be better for the teenager to formulate a more effective goal, namely going to the concert with parental permission.

Principle five, knowing how to deal well with others, involves the social skills of effective communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution. The planning of family vacations is a good example of how to put these skills to use. A family vacation should be fun for all family members and all can have a say in planning it. By sitting down together to discuss ideas, each member should have a turn to talk while others listen. From this experience, a consensus can be reached through negotiation and compromise. Being part of a shared goal, children learn how to cope positively when the majority decision does not go their way. For example, looking forward to something they can enjoy for the upcoming vacation helps them to manage disappointment and at the same time consider the needs of the rest of the family. A family that gets along with each other in a considerate manner provides the best foundation for subsequently getting along with others in school, at work, and within the community at large. Knowing how to do the right thing when interacting with others is the sign of a responsible, self-disciplined and socially effective human being.

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