

Parent & Community Network News

March 2011



*How wonderful it is that nobody
need wait a single moment before
starting to improve the world.*

~Anne Frank



Focus on Service Learning

Editor's Notes

As with you, I have been watching the news on the recent earthquakes and resulting tsunamis. Devastating events such as these powerfully impact our gifted children. Therefore I am excited that we have a guest article this month on nurturing empathy. Having empathy is the first step in being able to give something of ourselves and keeps us from being self-centered. When directed with appropriate support service learning can provide a variety of positive experiences including leadership opportunities and a feeling that one is making a difference in something very real. Please read with you and your children in mind.

I want to thank each of you who advocate in your own way for the benefit of gifted and other high ability children. There is no role you have that is more important than that of raising successful children and advocacy is such an important part of that.

As this is the last issue of the newsletter I will be editing, I wanted to let you know how important it is to continue to push for improvements in educational services and for a better understanding of the diverse needs of gifted children. I have been an advocate since the early 1970s in various capacities and know that with grandchildren I will continue my advocacy role.

I would like you to consider getting more involved with NAGC by becoming a full member, run for a network office or as a committee or board member. Through your participation, you can ensure parents continue to have a voice.

If you are interested in being the editor of this newsletter, please contact Pauline Bowie at: pauline@raisingthegifted.com. I am happy to assist you with the transition.

Thanks! Kathy Jones

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2011 Convention

New Orleans

November 3-6

Parenting Kids Who Care: Nurturing Empathy Within Our Children

By: Thomas P. Hébert, Ph.D., The University of Georgia

I was recently browsing in an airport newsstand and came upon a magazine for teenagers with a cover story entitled “Twenty Young People Who Will Change the World.” As someone interested in keeping up to date with talented adolescents, I quickly purchased the magazine and rushed off to catch my flight. I was pleased to read that the teenagers featured in the article were all young people who were making a difference in their communities by addressing serious problems through social action projects. In each case these were young men and women with empathy for the plight of others. Allow me to introduce several of them.

Jourdan Urbach of Roslyn, New York, discovered that music could serve as a powerful healer. He was playing his violin for a group of hospitalized children, and as he was providing his bedside concert, a young girl who had long been unresponsive suddenly began to move, much to the delight of her doctors. The gifted violinist and student at the prestigious Julliard School in New York City founded Children Helping Children, a charity that uses music to brighten the lives of children in hospitals and raise

money for medical research. At that time, Jourdan headlined benefit concerts at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall and helped to raise more than \$200,000 for hospitals and charities across the country. The young musician’s sensitivity to the plight of others was evident when he was interviewed by a journalist and discussed his efforts: “If a cause touches something inside you, there is no doubt that you’ll be successful in making a difference. There is no age requirement for doing something extraordinary” (Mascia, 2006, p. 119).

A second teenager featured in the article was Lindsey Williams of St. Joseph, Missouri. As a sixth-grader she became aware that the region of the country in which she lived was suffering increased shortages in food due to severe drought and food pantries were struggling to keep up with the demand. Lindsey explored planting methods in agricultural journals and designed a new irrigation system for small-scale farming that enabled her to produce two and a half times as many vegetables as the more traditional approaches. Shortly after, she was harvesting vegetables to supply several food banks with fresh produce.

By the time Lindsey was a high school senior, she had donated more than 35,000 pounds of fresh vegetables and provided families throughout her region of Missouri with nutritious meals. This sensitive young woman described an experience at a local food bank, “This little boy picked up a tomato, and his eyes got as big and round as that tomato. He looked at me and was like, ‘Can I have this?’ At that moment, I knew I was making a difference” (Beiles, 2006, p. 117).

Shortly after enjoying the article about these empathic

teenagers, I discovered Elizabeth Rusch’s (2002) *Generation Fix: Young Ideas for a Better World* in which she introduced her readers to young people throughout the country who were making a difference in their communities. One inspirational example was Joshua Marcus, a fifth grader from Boca Raton, Florida who thought that his community was “a fairy tale place with no poverty.” His perceptions changed after his mother took Josh to the Florence Fuller Child Development Center, a day-care center in a neighborhood of migrant farm workers. His experience with that visit opened his eyes to the needs of local children. When he learned that they needed school supplies to begin kindergarten, Josh became empowered. He initiated a program he called “Sack It to You,” through which he facilitated major fund-raising efforts with local businesses and with the money he raised he was able to purchase school supplies. When his older brother left for college, the Sack It To You backpacks and school supplies took over his bedroom. Josh organized pizza parties during which his best buddies, in an assembly-line operation, stuffed backpacks with supplies and then delivered them to churches and agencies throughout Boca Raton. In 5 years, Josh raised over a quarter of a million dollars to provide school supplies to young children from low-income families.

Young people like Jourdan, Lindsey, and Josh have helped me to realize that children have changed since I began my work in gifted education in the early 1980s. Other teachers, school counselors, and parents have agreed with me in that they too have seen evidence of changes in children’s sensitivity and awareness of societal issues. As an enrichment teacher, I worked with ele-

mentary and middle school students as they pursued their passionate interests in veterinary medicine, sports history, dinosaurs, ballet, and Greek mythology. Today as I visit gifted education classrooms I see that gifted students are engaged in pursuing many more projects and campaigns that address serious societal problems. Since the events of Columbine High School, the attack upon the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, and turmoil in the Middle East, young people are raising questions about the world around them and wanting to make it a little bit better through their contributions to the greater good. Years ago a student in my enrichment resource room wondered whether the *Hartford Courant* really had an accurate pulse on the cartoon-page readership by featuring Garfield cartoons rather than his favorite Spiderman comics. Although that may have been an interesting question to some 9-year-olds then, children today are asking serious questions about global warming, the energy crisis, and the plight of the underclass in our country. I celebrate this change I have seen in young people. Leaders in gifted education have long maintained that gifted students are often highly sensitive and empathic. With increased awareness of the world and its problems, these qualities appear to be more apparent than ever before. I offer the following discussion to encourage parents to consider how they may nurture empathy in their gifted sons and daughters..

How do we define empathy?

The term empathy is derived from the Greek word *empathia*, which implies an appreciation of another person's feelings. Empathy has been defined as the ability to understand and feel for the situation of another human being. Alfred Adler, a psychotherapist

and contemporary of Sigmund Freud, proposed a theory of social interest in which he explained the natural capacity of an individual to identify with all of humanity.

According to Adler, individuals with developed social interest were able to understand others' experiences, their feelings, and their opinions. Such people were tolerant, understanding, and able to empathize and identify with others. His popular description of empathy became known in terms of an individual being able to see through another's eyes, hear with another's ears, and feel with another's heart.

Empathy researchers have found children's empathy is shaped by seeing others react when someone else is suffering; by imitating what they see, children develop a repertoire of empathic responses. If children learn to be empathic that quality becomes a lifelong strength, therefore it is important that parents work to bring out the "good citizens" that reside within their children – the caring individuals who observe human needs and act spontaneously to address them.

How Can Parents Help?

One of the greatest gifts parents can give their gifted children is an appreciation of their sensitivity and empathic feelings for others. A supportive adult can help them find ways of coping with their strong emotions; but the first step is honoring those emotions in boys as well as in girls. Strive to nurture empathy within your children by providing outlets for their efforts. Below are suggestions for creating successful learning experiences for your children in which their empathy is channeled to help other people. As you consider the following recommendations, ask yourself if you would feel comfortable carrying out these plans with your children. Recognize that several may seem difficult for you and

keep in mind how important your modeled behavior will impact your children. Remember that they are the mirrors in which you can see your own reflection.

Provide Appropriate Outlets for Nurturing their Empathic Qualities

Parents searching the Internet with their children will discover a wealth of information about young people throughout our country who are working hard to make a difference in their world. One excellent Internet resource is the Kids Can Make a Difference. Log on to this site and you will learn of seventh graders from Mahoney Middle School in South Portland, Maine who conducted a program at the Portland Museum of Art entitled "Celebrating the Arts in Honor of World Hunger Education." Through their fund raising efforts they "adopted" a single parent family living in a local homeless shelter and provided them a heart-warming Christmas that will never be forgotten. The Kids Can Make a Difference website provides an extensive menu of over 30 inspirational examples of social action campaigns that children have carried out in their communities. (Web address: www.kidscanmakeadifference.org)

Several years ago I worked with a group of gifted elementary school students in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, who were involved in a summer enrichment mini-course in home design and construction. These boys and girls spent several weeks planning, designing, building, and painting a miniature house, which eventually became an ideal playhouse for young children. Upon completion of their life-sized toy house, they decided to donate their finished product to a local shelter for abused children. Parents, take out the lumber, nails and hammers, and do the same with your

WOW!

Webinars on Wednesdays!

March 30, 7:00 pm EST

**Making Differentiated Products
Powerful in the Middle Grades
Julia Roberts & Tracy Inman**

April 13, 7:00 pm EST

**The Road Less Traveled:
Combining Creative Thinking &
Differentiation
Patty Wood & Carol Tieso**

April 20, 7:00 pm EST

**The Problem With Praise:
Encouraging Effort and Motivation
in Children
Cindy Sheets & Kathy Jones**

April 27, 7:00 pm EST

**Twice Exceptional: The Curious
Dilemmas that Occur at the
Intersection of Gifted and Special
Education
Shelagh Gallagher**

www.nagc.org

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sons and daughters and their friends. Do you know of another children's home that might appreciate a tree house or a jungle gym?

The students in Alabama reminded me of many groups of high school students throughout the country who are involved in building homes for needy families through Habitat for Humanity. This organization is an international non-profit group whose purpose is to provide homes for impoverished people throughout the world. Inspired by the efforts of former President and First Lady Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, young people volunteer their weekends, spending time with work crews building modest new homes for poor families. High school and university students often spend summers volunteering their time for this worthwhile cause. Contact the international office of Habitat for Humanity and investigate how you and your teenagers can become involved. (Web address: www.habitat.org).

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) is always in need of your help. Help your children organize a neighborhood campaign for animals who have been abused. The national office of the ASPCA can provide you with materials available in several languages on a variety of animal-related topics. These materials have been designed for elementary school students carrying out awareness programs concerning animal cruelty. (Web address: www.asPCA.org).

The programs highlighted above are several examples of outlets for the efforts of young people engaged in social action. Together as a family try generating a list of more possibilities. Here are a few more ideas to get you started. Other helpful experiences might include initiating recycling efforts, nursing injured wild animals, sharing

talents in art at a children's hospital, organizing a fund raiser for the local Ronald McDonald House, or becoming readers for your library's talking books program for the vision impaired. The possibilities are endless.

Some parents may hesitate about allowing their children to get involved in addressing such serious societal problems. They may be concerned that these experiences might frighten children, as they become more aware of problems. However, with increased media coverage and more information provided through the Internet, children are readily exposed to society's problems. Often, parents may think this exposure might overwhelm their children and cause them to feel helpless.

Contrary to feeling helpless, getting young people involved in addressing the problems actually helps to reduce the amount of anxiety a child may experience. Researchers have found that young people are not overwhelmed with worries when they are actively engaged in developing solutions to community problems. Participation in social action projects actually provides empathic youngsters with a sense of control over their lives and they experience a real sense of fulfillment by helping others.

**Combine Your Efforts with a
Classroom Teacher**

Rest assured that you don't have to do this alone. While attending a workshop in action based problem solving, I was reminded of the importance of teachers and parents working together. The two teachers, who lead the session, Jann and Alice, have worked closely with parents in children's community problem solving efforts. During the workshop, they shared a compelling equation with their audience:

"Compassion = Community + Passion." Jann and Alice are right. The compassion you recognize in your children can be channeled to address real problems. Their energy can be channeled into meaningful experiences that bring about change in their communities and address problematic issues.

You can join efforts with teachers like Jann and Alice in infusing social action projects into your school's curriculum. Support your children's classroom teachers on curriculum committees that determine which school-wide campaigns would provide the most meaningful, enriched learning experiences that address both the cognitive and emotional development of children. As a parent leader in your child's school, help facilitate some of the projects described above through inter-disciplinary, social action curricular experiences. As you consider these efforts, be sure to investigate your community library for resources that support teachers and students engaged in social action projects. One of my favorites is Phillip Hoose's (2002) *It's Our World, Too! Young People Who are Making a Difference: How They Do It- How You Can Too!* Hoose provides an excellent resource filled with inspirational stories of young people who became involved in social action campaigns and provides helpful information about how to get started in facilitating similar projects.

Nurture Their Empathic Qualities through Friendships

Remember that although your children may appear very mature for having developed deep concerns for groups of people and their struggles, they still remain children. We need to be sure that along with caring for many people around them, they also need to care for themselves. In order to be good to others, they must also be good to

themselves. Therefore as parents, you will want to nurture the emotional health of your sons and daughters and help them keep a healthy and realistic perspective in their daily lives. One way to do this is to help them find friends who are similar to them.

You can help your children by providing opportunities to develop friendships with other children who share their same concerns about the world around them. Through involvement in social action projects, your son or daughter will meet other concerned students who are serious in addressing real problems. It's likely that these new partnerships will solidify into meaningful, rich friendships, since these young people will share similar passions. Empathic qualities within young people provide them with greater ability to establish and maintain important friendships.

Nurture Their Empathic Qualities through Literature

As you connect your son or daughter with other children who appreciate their empathic qualities, have them explore good literature about other young people who are like them. This strategy will also help to maintain healthy emotional lives. Stories from children's literature teach young people by providing them with insight about themselves and others. Through the characters in a good book, your son or daughter can absorb simple messages and significant ideas and use them as tools to interpret their empathic feelings. Sensitively written stories have the ability to touch children's minds and invite them to reconsider their own ideas about the passions in their lives.

Childhood is a critical period in a young person's life for developing emotional health. During this period, when you read stories with your children, you are inviting them

to experience the emotions expressed beneath the words of an author. Children can easily allow feelings to emerge spontaneously in response to events experienced by the character in a story. Celebrate this spontaneity and realize that a discussion of sensitivities can be therapeutic to your children who may need your support in better understanding their empathy.

Children's picture books provide many fine examples of young people who are empathic and can be shared with young people of all ages. One of my favorite books for children is Mem Fox's (1985) *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, a poignant story of a young boy named Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge who lives next door to a home for the elderly. Wilfrid becomes a favorite visitor at the home as he develops warm relationships with his neighbors. He grows to have a favorite friend there - Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt because she has four names just as he does. Miss Nancy is 96 years old and Wilfrid learns from the residents of the nursing home that his friend Miss Nancy has lost her memory. He searches for memories for his beloved friend since she has forgotten hers. He carries a basket of trinkets to Miss Nancy and as they share the basket together, the simple objects the young child has gathered for the elderly woman bring to her mind many fond memories which she shares with her little friend, including the first day he arrived in her life. The beauty of the relationship between the young boy and the woman is one which is appreciated by children who are aware of the world around them as well as sensitive to the feelings involved in a special friendship.

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge is just one example of a book that illustrates a child with empathic qualities. For parents in search of more good books featur-

ing gifted children I highly recommend Judith Halsted's (2009) *Some of My Best Friends are Books: Guiding Gifted Readers from Pre-School to High School*. This helpful resource provides an annotated bibliography of children's literature, organized according to issues or topics addressed in books for young people.

Nurture Their Empathic Qualities through Journaling

Another strategy you may want to consider to help your children understand and appreciate their sensitivity is to provide them experiences with journaling. As adults, many of you maintain private journals and reach for them whenever you struggle with personal problems and difficult decision making in your own lives. This technique is one you can easily share with your children. Provide both your sons and daughters with journals that can be locked to guarantee privacy. These locked journals are wonderful repositories of the sensitive feelings they may be experiencing every day. They need time to sort through these feelings in order to determine how they may address the problems of the world. By providing your children with this private outlet for their empathic qualities, you are honoring their feelings and letting them know that you admire them for their sensitivity. This is an important message for you to deliver to your children in a loving manner.

The Benefits of This Parenting Approach

As you prepare to engage in social action with your children consider the benefits. Through your efforts as a family, you are helping to bring about positive social change. You are spending important quality time as a family involved in a worthwhile cause. As parents, you are providing your children an outlet for

their empathic qualities. Through your modeling, you are providing your children a beautiful gift – an important lesson of love through their expression of concern for those less fortunate. In your efforts to nurture empathy within your children, you are parenting kids who care.

Thomas P. Hébert is a Professor of Educational Psychology in the College of Education at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA where he teaches graduate courses in gifted and talented education.

Book Review: by Lorel Shea

The Teen Guide to Global Action – How to Connect with Others (Near and Far) to Create Social Change is a very useful guidebook for teens and for younger kids who are interested in community service. The author, Barbara Lewis, is a former classroom teacher who has written several other winning books for young people concerned with social issues and self development.

This guide is easy to use and organized in a very accessible manner. Lewis defines seven key issues for today's teens to address. These are fairly broad in scope. For instance, one person might choose to work in the area of Human Rights, while another might tackle a problem in Education or Hunger and Homelessness. The broad format allows kids to creatively find ways to implement change or raise awareness that match their own strengths and interests. Actions are broken down into four basic steps and the student is walked through each phase. These begin with "Step 1: Find Your Cause" and end with "Step 4: Take Action". Each step includes details of how to complete tasks and move ahead. There are over 100 pages in this guide and many websites and references for service organizations

and causes are included.

Readers are invited to submit their own volunteer success stories for future editions of this guide.

Lorel Shea lives with her husband and four children in Connecticut's "Last Green Valley". She writes on gifted education, homeschooling, and parenting. Lorel is a board member of the Connecticut Association for Gifted and moderator for the Mensa BrightKids e-list.

**Unless
someone like
you cares a
whole awful lot,
nothing is
going to get
better.
It's not.
~Dr. Seuss**

**Find a need
and fill it.
~Ruth Stafford
Peale**

**Check out all the
resources for
parents at
www.nagc.org**