

Welcome to the Science of Parenting a podcast dedicated to sharing scientific information with parents. I am Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences Specialist, Family Life for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

“Be kind to others”. I remember my mother saying that to me as a child. Funny, how history repeats itself. I know I’ve preached the same message to my children. Researchers are now telling us, what my mother already knew, “Children aren’t born knowing how to be kind nor compassionate.”

What is “compassion”? Helen Weng, a researcher with the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the Waisman Center tells us that compassion can be taught and that compassion is an “emotional state of caring for people who are suffering in a way that motivates altruistic or caring behavior.”

Weng trained young people to engage in compassion meditation and techniques similar to weight training. The young people in the study went through a series of exercises that increased caring complexity. The study utilized MRI brain scans and found that brains changed with just 7 hours of training in compassion. It is interesting that just like physical and academic skills, compassion can be enhanced with training and practice.

Not surprising, Harvard researchers asked parents about the importance of instilling kindness in their kids. Most parents rank it high, and in many it is their very top priority. Sadly, they also report that children are getting a different message. Almost 80% said that their parents taught them that personal happiness and high achievement were more important than caring for other people. So parents are saying one thing, but perhaps acting another.

How do we raise kids that are compassionate and kind? We can give them opportunities to practice being kind. Children aren’t born with an instinctive ability to be kind, but must learn just like we learn language. Practice makes perfect and parents can encourage such simple opportunities like helping with housework. Another technique include helping children learn how to focus on others who need help. Parents as role models, in demonstrating empathy and concerns for others is an asset in our quest to raise caring kids. Children need to hear from their parents that caring for others is a top priority. Harvard researchers tell us that children are “not born simply good or bad and we should never give up on them. They need adults who will help them become caring, respectful, and responsible for their communities at every stage of their childhood.”

Join us this month on the Science of Parenting as we discuss ways that you can be a strong moral role model and mentor with your children. We will discuss how to help your child create a circle of concern and how to help them learn to care for someone outside their personal circle, we will find examples of how children can practice caring and gratitude and finally we will We will encourage you to share how you have made caring for others a top priority. As always we will look forward to hearing you and your own ideas on the importance of raising caring and compassionate children.