

A Different View

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Helping Children to See the World from Another's Perspective

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Franz Kafka once described war as a “monstrous failure of imagination.” In order to kill, one must cease to see individual human beings and instead reduce them to an abstraction: “the enemy.” Even in popular entertainment, the bad guys are never shown at home with their children. It’s easy to cheer the death of a caricature, not of a three-dimensional person.

But to step outside one’s own viewpoint, and consider how the world looks to another person is one of the most remarkable capabilities of the human mind. Psychologists call this skill “perspective taking,”* and it offers a foundation for morality. People who can – and do – think about how others experience the world are more likely to reach out and help

those people – or, at a minimum, are less likely to harm them.

Taking another person's perspective means realizing that in war, each person underneath our bombs is the center of his universe, just as you are the center of yours: He gets the flu, worries about his aged mother, likes sweets, falls in love – even though he lives half a world away and speaks a different language. To see things from his point of view is to recognize all the particulars that make him human, and ultimately it is to understand that his life is no less valuable than yours.

Less dramatically, many of the social problems we encounter on a daily basis can be understood as a failure of perspective taking. People who litter, block traffic by double-parking, or rip pages out of library books seem to be locked into themselves, unable or unwilling to imagine how others will have to deal with their thoughtlessness.

Developing the skill of perspective taking is a challenge; it's something people need to practice from the time they're young. So it's imperative that we try to cultivate it in our kids.

There are different levels of perspective taking, of course, and more sophisticated versions may elude very young children. The best we may be able to hope for in the case of a four year old is the rather primitive ethics of the Golden Rule. We might say (in a tone that sounds like an invitation to reflect, rather than a reprimand), "I notice you finished all the juice and didn't leave any for Amy. How do you think you would have felt if Amy had done that?" The premise of this question, probably correct, is that both kids like juice and would be disappointed to find none available.

But George Bernard Shaw reminded us that this sort of assumption doesn't always make sense. "Do not do unto others as you expect they should do unto you," he advised. "Their

tastes may not be the same.” And, we might add, their needs or values or backgrounds might not be the same, either. Older children and adults can realize that it’s not enough to imagine ourselves in someone else’s situation: We have to imagine what they’re feeling in that situation. We have to see with her eyes rather than just with our own. We have to – if I may switch metaphors – ask not just what it’s like to be in her shoes, but what it’s like to have her feet.

So how can we promote perspective taking in our children? How can we help them to develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how things look from points of view other than their own? First, we can set an example. After a supermarket cashier says something rude to us, we can comment to our child who has witnessed this: “Huh. He didn’t seem to be in a very good mood today, did he? What do you think might have happened to that man that made him so grouchy? Do you think someone may have hurt his feelings?”

It is enormously powerful to say things like this to our kids, to teach them that we need not respond to an individual who acts unpleasantly by getting angry – or, for that matter, by blaming ourselves. Rather, we can attempt to enter the world of that other person. It’s our choice: Every day our children can watch us as we imagine someone else’s point of view – or they can watch us remain self-centered. Every day they can witness our efforts to see strangers as human beings – or they can witness our failure to do so.

Besides setting an example, we can also encourage perspective taking by discussing books and television shows with our kids in a way that highlights the characters’ diverse perspectives. (“We’re seeing all of this through the eyes of the doctor, aren’t we? But what do you think the little girl is feeling about what just happened?”) We can even use perspective taking as a tool to help siblings resolve their conflicts. “Okay,” we might say, after a blow-up. “Tell me what just happened, but pretend you’re your brother and describe how things might have

seemed to him.”

Finally, we can help younger children become more sensitive to others’ emotions by gently directing their attention to someone’s tone of voice, posture, or facial expression, and by inviting them to reflect on what that person might be thinking and how he or she might be feeling. The point here is to build a skill (learning how to read other people), but also to promote a disposition (wanting to *know* how others are feeling, and being willing to figure it out). “I know Grandma said it would be okay to go on another walk with you, but I noticed that she paused a few seconds before agreeing. And did you see how tired she seemed when she sat down just now?”

The very act of teaching kids to pick up on such cues can help them to develop the habit of seeing more deeply into others. It will encourage them to experience the world as another person does, and perhaps to get a feel for what it’s like to be that other person. This is a major step toward wanting to help rather than to hurt – and, ultimately, toward becoming a better person oneself.

* Strictly speaking, perspective taking is the capacity to *imagine* how someone else thinks or feels, whereas empathy is the capacity to *experience* his or her feelings. “Empathy” is sometimes used imprecisely to refer to both of these, but it’s useful to distinguish between them because either without the other has its limits, as I argue in *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 1990), chaps. 4 and 5.