

# Raising an UnTrump

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## Raising an UnTrump

By Alfie Kohn

When the words “Trump” and “children” appear in the same sentence, it’s often because the writer is trying to figure out how to protect the latter from the former. How do we shield our offspring not only from what this man does (particularly if the youngsters in question are at risk of being harassed or deported) but from who he is? How do we explain to our kids that someone who bullies, lies, and boasts about assaulting women has made it to the White House? The news these days presents parents and educators with what might be described as a series of teachable moments that we never asked for and cannot easily avoid.

Then, too, there is the ugliness that many children face as a result of what Donald Trump has unleashed and empowered in their peers. “The Trump Effect,” a survey of about 2,000 teachers published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, described the effects on students of a rise in “uncivil political discourse” – notably anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments – in classrooms across the country. A subsequent, much larger survey conducted by SPLC after the election offered even more evidence of Trump-inspired hate incidents in schools. BuzzFeed, meanwhile, described events in 26 states in which students “invoked Trump’s name or message in an apparent effort to harass a classmate during the past school year.”

But let's imagine a different juxtaposition of "Trump" and "children" – one that is proactive by virtue of being paradoxical. What if we viewed this man who spends his days tweeting insults and self-congratulation as a really useful counterexample? Even before he ran for president, some of us had considered him Exhibit A for the proposition that it's possible to be rich and famous without being a successful human being by any meaningful psychological or moral standard.

Right off the bat, then, his behavior presents us with an intriguing challenge: Should we be pushing our kids to sacrifice everything for high grades and test scores in the hopes of being accepted by an elite college so that they will ultimately achieve success in the conventional sense of that word? Apart from the disturbing emotional and intellectual downside to this quest, Donald Trump reminds us that we also may have overestimated the upside.

The premise here is a phenomenon that might be called negative learning: Rather than just following good role models, we can also, if you will, "unfollow" very bad role models. Every day, with remarkable specificity, Trump sets an example of the kind of person we desperately hope our children will never grow up to resemble. He is a living cautionary tale, and attention must be paid.

We might proceed, then, by making a list of the man's characteristics, noticing how they are connected, and then framing mindful parenting as a gradual process of promoting in our kids exactly the opposite attribute in each case. As someone who works with, and writes for, parents and teachers, I realize there is no straightforward recipe for raising a certain kind of person. Much depends on influences outside the home, on inborn temperament, and on plain luck. But I also know that a sizable collection of resources exists to improve the odds of raising an unTrump. Consider just a few examples.

## **1. To avoid his neediness and nastiness, help kids be at peace with themselves**

When asked after the 2016 Republican National Convention what people should take away from the event, the party's nominee offered a single, unintentionally poignant response: "The fact that I'm very well liked." Later, he explained his affinity for Vladimir Putin by noting that "many years ago, he said something very nice about me." Trump's desperate need for approval and attention is closely related to his tendency to be petulant – indeed, vicious and vindictive – when criticized. He personifies the dark side of extreme neediness.

By contrast, we want our children to be resilient; to be able to accept and learn from criticism rather than lashing out at the critic; to enjoy the limelight, perhaps, but not to need it. In short, we'd like them to have a solid core of comfort with, and faith in, themselves. A substantial body of psychological research shows that self-esteem is closely related to mental health (notwithstanding the scorn heaped on the concept by many conservatives). People who think reasonably well of themselves tend to be more satisfied with life, less depressed, more optimistic, and more likely to persist at difficult tasks. High self-esteem, by the way, is completely different from the grandiosity, defensive sense of entitlement, and perpetual bluster that characterize narcissism, which some experts see as an attempt to compensate for *low* self-esteem.

More recent studies add an interesting twist: The late Michael Kernis at the University of Georgia and other psychologists have shown that it isn't just how *much* self-esteem one has that matters but how stable it is. Even high levels of self-regard that are fragile or experienced as conditional – "I like myself only when..." – may produce anger or depression. The ideal, therefore, is an abiding sense of one's own value even when one screws up or falls short. Parents can help children acquire healthy *unconditional* self-esteem by loving them

without strings attached. The more that kids know our care for them doesn't have to be earned – that they matter to us because of who they are, not because of what they've done – the more likely they are to be at peace with themselves.

## **2. To avoid his egocentricity, help kids focus on others' needs**

Donald Trump has been described as someone who mistakes cruelty for strength. His lifelong project of self-aggrandizement entails exploitation partly because he seems to view people solely in terms of whether they can benefit him. But we'd like our kids to regard others as valuable and important in their own right. We want them to be able to imagine how other people think and feel about the world (which psychologists call "perspective taking") and sometimes even to experience those feelings along with them (which is the strict definition of "empathy").

Again, there are guidelines to make it more likely that our children will be empathic rather than egocentric. We can set an example of showing concern for others, including people we don't know, and thinking aloud about how events appear from others' points of view. We can discuss books and TV shows with our kids in a way that highlights the characters' diverse perspectives. ("We're seeing all of this through the eyes of the policeman, aren't we? But what do you think the little girl is feeling about what just happened?")

We can make sure that children have opportunities not only to reflect on what others need but to participate in meeting those needs – to help a sibling, care for a pet, teach a skill to a friend. Ultimately, we want to help them develop a "prosocial orientation" even toward people they may not like...or look like. In contrast to Trump's posture toward The Other – notably anyone who is not white, Christian, and American – we should encourage children to locate themselves in widening circles of care that extend beyond self, beyond

family, beyond neighborhood, beyond country.

### **3. To avoid his desperate competitiveness, help kids to collaborate**

Alongside the fault of mistaking cruelty for strength (and seeing kindness as weakness) is the tendency to confuse success with victory. Competition is a compulsion for Donald Trump; he has an unrelenting need for dominance and apparently sees just about everyone as a rival to be bested. More than a quarter-century ago, in a lengthy interview, he sounded those themes repeatedly, insisting that everything he did was the “finest,” “most spectacular,” “number one,” “the best.” And he is still at it.

The less at ease you are with yourself, the more you need to swagger and preen, to make others (even the members of your own cabinet) pay homage to you, to triumph over others – all in a desperate (and ultimately futile) attempt to prove that you’re not a loser. See? I must be a winner if I can shout “You’re fired!” at all those people, deport millions of immigrants, demand that Mexico pay for my wall. I *must*, right? Right??

The antidote for – or, perhaps, the inoculation against – this pathology is, again, to raise children who are unconditionally loved and at peace with themselves. But we can also teach them, at home and at school, that life generally is *not* a zero-sum game, that cooperation can be mutually beneficial. Sometimes we will encourage helping for the sake of helping, just because it’s the right thing to do and makes the other person happy. Other times, we can provide opportunities for (and explain the benefits of) collaboration, an arrangement where helping others also benefits us. The goal is to see a stranger as a potential ally, someone to play or work with, rather than as someone to be defeated. A mountain of research – including studies by David and Roger Johnson at the University of Minnesota – shows that having students learn in

pairs and small groups, if done carefully, can simultaneously foster academic, social, and moral growth – and, when the groups are diverse, can reduce prejudice.

#### **4. To avoid his hunger for money, help kids to lead more meaningful lives**

When Trump announced last year, “My whole life I’ve been greedy, greedy, greedy; I’ve grabbed all the money I could get,” this was not an unprecedented experiment with self-criticism. (Indeed, his inability to engage in serious reflection and acknowledge his faults might be added to our list of qualities to help children transcend.) Rather, he regards acquisitiveness as something to be proud of and consequently judges people on the basis of how much they have. Or at least he judges men that way; women, he evaluates primarily on their attractiveness. (Another item for the list.)

Tim Kasser at Knox College has been studying this topic for almost 25 years. He and his colleagues have consistently found – across cultures and regardless of actual income level – that the more important it is to people to be rich or famous, the less satisfied they are with themselves and their lives and the more transient their relationships tend to be. In one early study, Kasser and two coauthors discovered that young adults for whom financial success was a salient goal were likely to have had a parent who was not very nurturing. When parents are “cold and controlling,” they wrote, “their children apparently focus on attaining security and a sense of worth through external sources.”

It makes sense for us to let children know there are deeper satisfactions in life than a fat paycheck or the latest digital device. And it’s important to *show* them this by the way we live our own lives. But perhaps most decisive is the warmth and responsiveness of our relationships with them. When children’s needs for close connection and acceptance are met,

they may be less likely to grow up trying to fill an emotional hole with material objects.

And when they come across a “wealth addict” (in the sociologist Philip Slater’s apt phrase), someone who not only needs more and more possessions but has to slap his name on everything he owns, perhaps they will react not with envy or admiration but with pity. That will be one indication that we did our job as parents.

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