



Maryville Daily Times, June 1, 2008

The Season for Giving

Brenda-Lee Duarte, LPC, LifeLine Counseling Center

This is the season for kindness and giving. I like to think of that the words of one of my favorite holiday songs from the Trans-Siberian Orchestra refer to compassion. The song says, "This night we pray, our lives will show, this dream he had, each child still knows". Recently a colleague told me a story about her eight year old and his response to his classmates picking on a particular child. He was quite distraught at the treatment this child was receiving from the other children and after some guidance from his mother he had returned home from school one day pleased to report that he had stepped in and stopped the picking. All individuals can learn to be kind and compassionate, including young children. There is no better place to start teaching kindness and compassion than the home. The ability to be compassionate is not something that can be learned overnight. Before they can be empathic towards other people, children need to know that other people have feelings.

Kindness should also extend to animals and the environment. It is a gradual learning process that takes place over time by actions as well as reminders and good examples. The best way to teach children kindness is by example. Whether by doing volunteer work, mowing a neighbor's lawn or just treating others with dignity and respect, children pick up on this and want to imitate it. Actions should match our words by showing respect for others no matter what their situation. Organizations such as the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation and the Pay it Forward Foundation all suggest teaching children kindness by having them do kind acts, such as: Participating in a walk or run that raises money for a good cause, donate regularly to the local food bank, letting children think of ways to help out victims of hurricanes, earthquakes and other disasters.

One study out of the University of Minnesota showed that children who did chores or assigned tasks had better feelings of responsibility and self-worth years later. And children who feel good about themselves are more respectful to others. Children can be assigned tasks and chores that are age and developmentally appropriate. Children raised in kind, respectful households learn what it feels like to be treated kindly. Give praise freely when children have done kind things for others. If you see your child doing something kind, give them a star on a chart, and have those build toward a treat such as a special dinner or an outing. The reason for being kind is to make the world a better place. So when your child does a kind act, or you witness something kind or even when you're the recipient of kindness, celebrate it. Some children are naturally empathetic but parents still need to work on helping them maintain the trait. Parents are more likely to bring kindness into the family by being a good role model, teaching children that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect, and praising children when they are kind and compassionate.