

Social Interest and the Child

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Have you ever noticed how people change when there is some kind of natural calamity – like a big snowstorm that shuts everything down? Neighbors, who normally go about focused on their own lives, are more helpful, concerned and just generally connected to each other as they shovel themselves out. During a recent power blackout, our neighbor, who usually keeps to herself, came by with an ice chest to put our frozen food in. What is it about adversity that pulls us together?

What are you seeing during that blizzard is a re-vitalization of a natural caring and interest in others that is innate in all of us. Psychologists call this human characteristic social interest, which is all about having a feeling, or empathy, for other people and is at the core of cooperation and compassion. When you have social interest you are able to see with others' eyes and feel with others' hearts. It's caring about others, not *more* than ourselves but at least as much. We all have it to one degree or another, even though it is not always on display. How else could all of us puny little humans cooperate in killing all those giant woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers that roamed the earth when we were evolving?

As parents, it's helpful to know that social interest is in the psychological core of every child, but it has to be nurtured, not smothered by an oversupply of pampering and discouragement.

There are lots of great ways for parents to encourage social interest and cooperation in our children (selecting a Montessori school is one of them)

Here are the three ways we feel are the best:

- Having regular family meetings.
- Giving children responsibilities around the house.
- Modeling respectful, caring behavior yourself.

Family Meetings

We spend a lot of time in our parenting workshops showing parents how to run family meetings. That's because this is another powerful tool in developing social interest. In the family meetings, everyone – parents and children – works together to solve problems and make plans and decision that affect the whole family. It gives everyone a chance to hear how others are feeling (which develops empathy) and teaches children to listen respectfully.

Responsibilities

Helping out at home is one of the best ways to foster social interest because there are so many opportunities in daily life. When children help out – doing dishes, taking out the garbage, folding laundry, etc. – they experience a deep satisfaction because they know they are valuable members of the group. And, because human beings are so social, it is imperative for us to feel this. (Interesting, if they can't find their place in the group through positive means, children will eventually find it through misbehavior.)

But, as the following example shows, it's easy for parents to discourage this natural tendency without meaning to, by pampering.

Ten-year-old Shawna has a pair of energetic go-getters for parents and two helpful older siblings. Every Sunday Grandma comes over for a big dinner and then the family cleans up.

“Give me a hand clearing the table, Shawna,” Grandma says.

“Aww, but my favorite TV show is on. Can’t I do it later?”

Mom, who knows she doesn’t need a ten-year-old to help clean up a kitchen, jumps in: “That’s OK. It’s her favorite show. We can do the cleaning up without her”

Later Shawna comes in for some water and sees the rest of the family working together in the kitchen, talking and laughing as a group. She doesn’t know how to set it in words, but she feels a little separated from them and unsure of how to make a contribution. Everyone, including her older brother and sister, are so much bigger and better than she is. They don’t really need her help, that’s for sure.

Grandma holds out a dishtowel. “I need some help here, Shawna. You dry and I’ll stack.”

Shawna’s not so sure about this. “But my show is on.”

“Gee, that’s too bad,” Grandma says, turning back to the dishes. “It would have been fun to talk as we cleaned up.”

Well that was different. Shawna likes talking to Grandma. Reluctantly, she begins to help. Soon she’s absorbed in her work, and having so much fun she has completely forgotten about America’s Next Top Model on TV. After the kitchen is cleaned up, she is glowing with a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Shawna wants to help; she just needs to be given the opportunity.