

Time for a Social Vaccine: Immunizing Children from life's difficulties and obstacles

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How do we protect our children from the many social problems in today's world? Well, the simple fact of the matter is that by age 11 or 12 these larger social problems become part of our children's everyday lives. All children will eventually be exposed to the common social problems which can adversely impact their lives such as drugs, alcohol, violence, bullying, sexual harassment, crime, truancy, and so forth. So what can a parent do, aside from keeping our children locked in a closet or inside a protective bubble?

The answer, research indicates, is not much different than what our own parents and grandparents discovered. In former days, smallpox, polio, measles/rubella and other childhood diseases were the things most feared by parents and from which they sought to protect their children. The answer was found not found in eliminating these problems nor in isolating our children from them. Rather, the answer was to develop vaccines and inoculate children against such diseases; providing them with a protective shield, if you will. A recent Task Force investigating the problems impacting today's youth, concluded that what is needed today is the equivalent of a *Social Vaccine*, something that *empowers* children to live responsibly and that *inoculates* them against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, interpersonal abuse, violence, chronic welfare dependency and educational failure. The psychological literature refers to this as building **resilience** in children, both in the home and the school.

Building resilience in children involves two components: teaching essential social-emotional skills and, creating positive, protective social environments - in the home, school and community. When schools and parents work together to teach social-emotional skills, the research indicates, four main outcomes are realized: Higher academic achievement, increased motivation & aspirations, higher achievement scores in math and reading, and better social behavior/adjustment with both peers and adults

While it is beyond the scope of this column to discuss all the social-emotional competencies associated with resilience in children, let's focus on the single most important social competence, **Empathy**. In a national longitudinal study, empathy was found to be the "transformative" adaptive defense to adverse life situations; the meta-social competency if you will. Fostering empathy skills in our children early in life appears to be the single best determinant of our children's likelihood of leading happy, successful lives in career, family and community. Empathy is a key ingredient in developing Resilient kids; a social vaccine against the social ills in our society.

So, how does a parent set about teaching empathy skills to a child? Here are a few suggestions:

Suggested Home Activities to Teach Empathy:

1. Ask your librarian for children's stories in which a character deals with a common childhood issue (e.g. bullying, making new friends, moving, feeling left out, moral decisions, loss of pet or loved one, illness, etc). Have your child check out one of these books and read the story with your child; discuss how the character felt, why he behaved as he or she did and better options for handling such emotions and thoughts more effectively. Also include how one might help a person in this situation.
2. Talk with your child about times when someone in your life has encouraged you, lifted you up when you were down, stood up for you. Also share stories of times you or other members of the family have reached out and helped someone in need.

3. Hold a “family movie night” in which the family is to watch together and discuss a movie involving caring, empowering acts: e.g., Rudy, Brian’s Song, Finding Neverland, Blood Diamond, Hotel Rawanda, etc.
4. Interview family members and list what makes each of you feel: happy, proud, worried, angry, hurt, loved, rejected, capable, inept, etc...
5. Read newspaper articles, magazine stories or watch the tv news with your child focusing on stories about conflicts (between nations, political parties, labor/management, etc) and discuss with them the various sides, or positions, of the issue.
6. Provide an opportunity for your family to volunteer or visit one day at the Special Olympics, a local hospital, food kitchen, or some other community program for disabled children or adults. Discuss what you all learned.
7. Talk with your child about a time when a family member or friend needed help and you stepped in and helped them when times were bad. Download the song, “Lean on Me” and discuss how we each “lean on” each other in the family at times.
8. Have your family identify a local group (village, homeless, children’s home, etc) who need a lending hand to help them survive and develop a home-school partnership to assist.
9. Have your child gather up old books, clothes, toys and take them to a shelter for abused or orphaned children. Discuss what life is like for these children and how your child has just helped.
10. Read a story together about a child being bullied (e.g. Bully of Barkham Street, or see your librarian for other suggestions)... talk about how the victims felt when friends did not help out, say anything. Discuss what others should do when they see someone being picked on, made fun of, rejected, isolated, etc..
11. With your child, research individuals in history who have displayed altruism in situations dangerous to themselves such as Holocaust heroes (Miep Gies, Varian Fry, Albert Goering, Emile Schindler, Kurt Gerstein, Wilm Hosenfeld, Berthold Beitz, and Pinchas Tibor Rosenbaum); or John Adams defending the British soldiers of the “Boston Massacre”; Paul Rosenbaum; Paul Rosenbaum; and Harriet Tubman, etc

Suggested Books for Family Reading/Discussion on Empathy/ and Altruism

1. Diary of Anne Frank . (Frank, A.) Diary of girl in early teens kept in hiding from Nazi occupation in the Netherlands.)
2. Your Name is Renee. (Cretzmeyer, S., 1999) Story of Ruth Kapp Hartz’s experience as a hidden child in nazi occupied France. Oxford University Press)
3. A Long Way Gone. (Beah, Ishmael, 2007. Memoirs of a 12 year old boy forced to become a boy soldier in Sierra Leone, Africa and his eventual rehabilitation).
4. I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced. (Nujood Ali & Delphine Minoui, 2010). New York: Broadway paperbacks.
5. Our America: Life and death on the south side of Chicago. L. Jones and L. Newman, 1997). New York: Pocket Books.