

Connecting Generations

NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project

Whether you are a grandparent, a neighbor, an aunt or uncle, you have much to contribute to children. Because we were raised in a different time period, our values and perceptions of the world can be quite different from those of the younger generation. In our work as part of the NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project, we found that building relationships is a foundational piece of passing on our values. Most cultures in the world honor elders and their ability to pass on values and a sense of historical connection. It is the human to human interaction and storytelling that creates a sense of belonging from generation to generation and develops a continuity of values.

Building relationships with children in your lives

Do you have a childhood memory of someone with whom you loved to share your ideas and thoughts? Who you knew would be interested in what you had to say? It is special to be that person to the children in our lives.

A fundamental aspect of relationship building is learning how to listen and encourage children to be open and share with us. Listening to a child builds trust, and in those trusting relationships we get to experience the joy of seeing the world through a child's eyes.

One Thanksgiving while adults were catching up, Grandpa Jake followed four-year-old Elisa into the bedroom and observed her playing with a doily that she had taken off a chair. She was talking about "the prince." Grandpa Jake put the doily on his head and became "the prince." "Tell me about this prince" he said. She started to tell him a whole fantasy story about this prince. As she talked, Grandpa Jake acted out the part. He was totally available to her. He was not afraid to be silly and soon they were both laughing. He learned a lot about his granddaughter that day and she learned that she could be herself, trust him not to take over the play...and he was fun.

One of the ways we become skillful listeners is to ask open-ended questions. These are questions that don't have a right answer, require more than one-word response, and encourage children to think: "What do you think?", "I wonder," "What's your idea?", "Tell me about."

Mordecai visits his grandparents every Monday and Wednesday. One day while playing with his trains (which was a daily routine), Grandma asked, "Tell me about your trains." That was all that the 3-year-old needed to invent a lengthy story about each train, what it was carrying, where it was going, and how one of the trains was stronger than the others and was helping to push the weaker train up the hill. Grandma learned about how her grandson saw the world and that he had begun to internalize the values that his family was teaching him. She was able to reinforce the values of helping, using your strength for good, and sharing that he expressed in the story he had created.

We have discovered that children are more likely to share their ideas and experiences while engaged in some kind of activity such as riding in the car, walking, or working together on a project. We have experienced a shy grandchild talking non-stop while sitting in the backseat of a car, and another grandchild sharing his new experience with a school-age crush while working on a building project with his grandpa.



Mordecai tells his grandpa that "swinging really high is very fun, and a little scary."

We have found that an essential ingredient for encouraging children to share their ideas and experiences is to remain nonjudgmental in our responses. We can impart our own values by asking reflective questions rather than stating our opinions. We resist stating something like, "That doesn't sound kind to me," but rather ask the child "How do you think Mary felt when that happened?" In this way we encourage children to think about and evaluate their own experiences, and in the process nurture the internalization of social values.

Sharing your values and experiences together

What childhood memory do you have of an elder imparting their values to you? Are these values still significant in your life? Are these values ones that you want to pass along to the younger generation?

As we think about imparting our values, we do need to take special care to be respectful of the values of the child's parents. When we have a value that we know to be different from those of the parent, we don't want to create a conflict for the child. A good example might be Grandma's or Tia's value of politeness and manners while mom and dad think that insisting on children saying *please* and *thank you* is not essential. It is important for children to learn that there are many different ways to think about things. Hopefully, we can comfortably model and pass on basic values such as compassion, kindness, consideration, loyalty, humor, responsibility, and joy.

One of the most powerful ways we can share our values is through personal storytelling. The story needs to relate to something that is -- or could be -- happening in the child's life. It needs to be a story that is presented simply enough for the child to hear the message, and be able to imagine it, so that it's very real:

- Offer to help the child bake muffins for his/her friend who is coming over for a play-date. This kind of activity models the values of a good deed: kindness, consideration, effort, and respect for others.
- Share family stories of cooking together, such as when you and your mom used to make cookies for a neighbor.
- Document your time together by having the child dictate a story which you write down, perhaps including a photograph or an illustration made by the child. The child then has a

keepsake that he or she can go back to as a memory of a special time with a special and trusted adult.

Another wonderful way to connect with children is through reading books. Going to the library together can be an exciting activity. You might want to find a favorite childhood book of their mother or dad. While it's helpful to have read the book before time to know if you want to share it with the child, if you don't have that opportunity remember the most valuable part of reading a book is the conversation that comes from it. Open-ended questions promote conversation; conversation promotes relationships.

Books can lead to all kinds of extended projects or activities as well as conversations. For instance, the book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* by Virginia Lee Burton (2006) can lead to a variety of activities:

- Play with cars and trucks.
- Play a “telling time” game.
- Take field trips such as visiting the beach to play in the sand, or to a construction site to watch the machines at work.
- Use conversations to reinforce values, such as:
 - Loyalty (Mike Mulligan's loyalty to his steam shovel).
 - Newer is not always better.
 - Being useful (the transformation of the steam shovel into a heating source for the building and Mike's new job as the superintendent).

Do you remember the book *The Story of Ferdinand* (Leaf, 2007)? The values presented include being gentle, being true to yourself, and standing up for yourself. Can you imagine the activities that you could do to reinforce the intent of this book? Weaving activities together such as sharing

related books, songs, and art activities, combined with conversation, strengthen and extend the opportunity for connection.

Other activities to consider are sharing your favorite hobbies, gardening, spending time in nature, watching or participating in sports, and listening to or making music. All of these ideas will work for the once-a-year visit or more frequent visits. There are so many human-to-human interactions that serve as positive alternatives to electronic media (TV, videos, movies) and trips to the toy store that ultimately build meaningful relationships and help form lasting bonds across the generations.



Stefan and his PaPa's afternoon duet.

In closing, the NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project has several values you might want to consider sharing with the children in your life. Foremost is peace: Peace within and peace between people. We also treasure values such as respect for differences and caring for yourself, others, and the world. Please check out our website to find a list of children's books that support these values.

References

Burton, V.L. (2006). *Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel*. London: Sandpiper Books.

Leaf, M. (2007). *The story of Ferdinand*. New York: Puffin.

Resource

NonViolence in the Lives of Children Project: www.nvpchildren.org