

9 March 2021

## When self-ishness is a strength

By Michael Grose

“Share your things with your brother. Don’t be so selfish!”

If you, like me, still have this message rattling around your head then you’ll know how much kids’ selfishness is frowned upon by parents. It sits alongside negative terms such as spoilt, bratty and mean-spirited.

I’ve long sung the praises of parents who promote a sense of generosity and giving in their kids. I hold the firm belief that one of the central tasks for parents is to socialise children so that the next generation has a strong sense of civic-mindedness.

There’s a place for developing self-*ishness* in children, but not the mean-spirited variety. Here are some aspects of self-ishness that help ensure kids become happy, successful and contributing community members.

### Self-awareness

Young children have few social filters. They’ll blurt out comments at the worst possible moment that are guaranteed to embarrass you, your neighbour or relative. Embarrassing comments may be cute in toddlers but they lose their shine when children reach the school years. Parents can encourage self-awareness by drawing children’s attention to the requirements of different social situations, varying their social experiences and keeping behavioural expectations high. The socialisation process means that kids need to be aware of how their words and actions impact on others, and modify their behaviours accordingly.

### Self-regulation

A child’s awareness of their emotional world is a wonderful gift. A rarer gift is the ability to regulate emotions such as anxiety, sadness and anger. Being able to identify their feelings, or at least, have the sense of awareness that something doesn’t feel right is central to emotional intelligence and is a requirement if they are to develop empathy. Parents can encourage self-regulation in children by drawing attention to feelings, creating moments of stillness and giving them tools to calm themselves down when they’re upset.

### Self-knowledge

My daughter came back from a six-month student exchange in Denmark as a sixteen year old with a remarkable sense of maturity. The challenge of living away from home for so long had given her what so many teenagers lack – self-knowledge. The experience taught her a great deal about herself, her strengths and vulnerabilities. She arrived home with a sense of ‘this is who I am’, which is one of the central tasks of adolescence. Parents can promote kids’ self-knowledge by helping them identify their strengths, encouraging a wide range of interests and providing challenge opportunities during the last years of primary school and throughout the secondary school.

## Self-discipline

Could your child sit at the meal table with food in front of them and wait until everyone has been seated before eating? I hope so, because little acts of denial such as this encourage the self-discipline required for later success. The ability to delay immediate gratification whether 'to do the right thing' or to ensure greater and later success is needed in every aspect of life. Self-discipline, like a muscle, needs to be exercised or it deteriorates. Parents can develop self-discipline in their children by encouraging small acts of delayed gratification such as saving pocket money. Help them understand that some desirable outcomes such as achieving good academic marks, gaining sporting awards and helping others generally require them to give up something in return.

## Self-leadership

Leadership is a hot topic at the moment, particularly in the political sphere. The seeds of great leadership are sown in childhood by parents who teach kids solid values such as respect, accountability, kindness and empathy. They encourage skills such as emotional smarts, clear articulation and developing independence. In many ways self-leadership is the sum of these traits combined. Importantly, it comes before successful leadership in a public sense such as leading a school group, a sporting team, a workplace group or a family.

## In closing

Kids' abilities and attitudes vary, and they shift at different stages of development, which makes raising kids according to templates such as the one above tricky. It's generally not until adulthood that we see the lasting impact of our parenting efforts and it's the big ideas such as developing positive self-ishness traits that have the most lasting impact on kids.