

Raising Empathetic Children in a Post-9-11 Climate of Uncertainty by Linda Lantieri

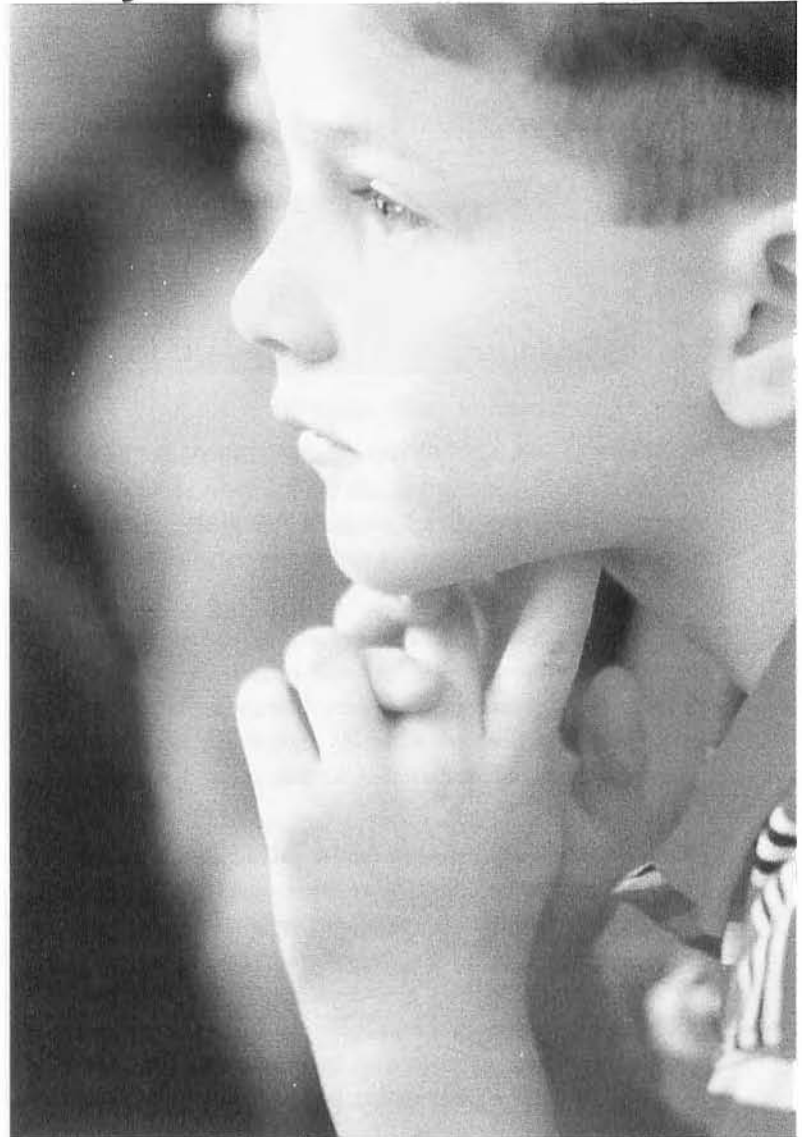
For parents, the healing process around the events of September 11, 2001 has been doubly challenging. As time passes, we move from helping our children cope with the fear and uncertainty to teaching them about empathy and compassion. In the midst of a climate of retaliation and revenge, how can we continue to nurture the quality of empathy in our children?

Those like myself, who live in New York City where the tangible images of "9-11" remain very much present, can perhaps more easily express our empathy with others by visiting Ground Zero. Many parents in New York City, however, struggle with whether this pilgrimage would traumatize their children even more. That was the decision my friend Robert and his wife faced as they reached out to their 10-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son.

For several weeks after September 11, Robert, his wife, and children baked cookies as a family and then visited a different New York City firehouse each week. They took the cookies to lift the firefighters' spirits and some money to help with the daunting task of taking care of the victims' families. This went on for several weeks until one day 10-year-old Sophia announced, "We shouldn't be making cookies any more because my teacher told me in school that 'we are back to normal and we don't need to be talking about the World Trade Center anymore.'" Robert wisely asked, "And how do you feel about that, Sophia?" To which she promptly replied, "That will be hard because I still think about the Twin Towers everyday." Leave it to a child to remind us that we are still figuring out how to allow our hearts to stay open.

Nurturing caring and connection in the home

How can we use world events such as September 11 to nurture the development of empathy and compassion in our children? Empathy, the root of caring, is the ability to imagine and understand other people's feelings without their having to tell you how they feel. People rarely express their feelings in words alone, and empathy includes being able to read facial expressions, gestures, and other nonverbal signals. Empathy is a critical human capacity and is crucial for harmonious relationships. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, tells us, "Empathy underlies many facets of moral judgment and action. It allows someone to 'feel for' the circumstances [of] another, which may or may not result in actions, sometimes even altruistic in nature."



Empathy unfolds in children throughout their childhood, beginning when an infant hears another baby cry and starts to cry himself or herself. When a young toddler sees another child fall down and get hurt, he or she will usually do something to soothe the other. As a child gets older, empathy is exhibited by the ability to understand other people's perspectives and to read their feelings. Parents, acting as emotional coaches, can help strengthen a child's sense of empathy. When a child has done something upsetting, "How do you think I'm feeling right now?" can be a very useful question. Parents can also encourage siblings to tell each other how they feel in constructive ways, especially when conflict arises.



What families can do to foster empathy

- **Build safe, caring, and respectful homes.** Homes can be microcosms of our highest aspirations for our own society—places where there is physical and psychological safety, where family members express care for one another and show respect for each other's differences.
- **Help children develop skills for expressing and managing their emotions, and for empathizing with others.** We can teach our children social skills that strengthen their capacity to cooperate, participate, and problem solve by modeling those skills ourselves. We must remember that actions usually speak louder than our words.
- **Provide opportunities for children to talk about their thoughts and feelings.** It is important to provide a variety of opportunities for children and young people to express their feelings, talk about what's on their minds, and ask questions. Focus on listening and letting children's questions guide our responses and children's exploration of the issues. It is often helpful for parents to refrain from sharing their own opinions or overloading children with too much information before they have a chance to identify their own concerns.
- **Encourage thoughtful dialogue about the issues raised by the 9-11 tragedy and other concerns our children have.** The significant issues of our times are often complex and controversial. Help your children develop the skills to listen for deeper understanding, think critically about public issues, make informed judgments, and take meaningful action. In the aftermath of September 11, hard questions are being asked. For example, what motivated the hijackers to do what they did? Why do so many people around the globe seem to "hate" the United States? It is particularly important for parents to seek out and present multiple perspectives on these and other important issues.

- **Teach about prejudice and discrimination.** Just as children get their first lessons about how to deal with their feelings in the home, it is there that they start to learn about how to treat others. Children need to know that they can ask for help in making sense of the many messages—positive and negative—they get from society at large, by coming to us as parents and openly talking about these things. We have already heard numerous stories about discrimination against Arab Americans, Muslims, Sikhs, and others who are perceived to be culturally different. Help young people understand the dynamics and human costs of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Offer your children opportunities to experience people from different backgrounds firsthand. Teach by example. First admit your own prejudices, and avoid jokes and other expressions that stereotype people.
- **Provide opportunities for participation.** Fortunately, some powerful, positive lessons are already being taught in our society. In times of crisis, ordinary people like the firefighters, police, and relief workers in New York City do heroic things. Learning is strengthened when it is embodied in action, so it is vital to give children meaningful opportunities to contribute to the lives of others and improve the world around them. Find one thing you can do regularly as a family to practice empathy toward others.

Conclusion

I believe that the dilemmas of our times are deeply ethical and spiritual ones that our children need to be prepared to meet. I, for one, will continue to work for a world in which children's thoughts and feelings are heard; a world in which thoughtful dialogue about complex and controversial issues is always welcome; a world in which prejudice, discrimination, and hatred have no place; a world in which there are many opportunities for children to engage and actively participate in our democratic process as we help to improve the lives of others and the world around us.

Marian Wright Edelman, in her book *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*, captures the heart and soul of most parents' hopes in a letter to her son, who was then 21:

"I seek your forgiveness to all the times I talked when I should have listened; got angry when I should have been patient; scolded when I should have encouraged; criticized when I should have complimented....I hope so much that the balance of your childhood memories will be positive and loving....What we owe you, our children, is our best effort to be a person worth emulating. I hope I can grow big enough one day to feel I have done that." **OC**

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