

Nurture by Nature

Raising healthy, happy kids

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER

The rustling and conversations take a bit longer to subdue than usual, but it's what we've come to expect with a group of parents. The moms and dads believe the social involvement workshop they are attending, which is hosted by Free the Children, is designed to help their children become more active in their schools and communities. But while another facilitator works with the kids, we have the parents to ourselves for an hour. We begin by asking, What qualities would you like to nurture in your children?



In the hundreds of workshops we've held, parents often pause to think of their answers, which consistently carry the same theme: compassion, caring, empathy and social responsibility. Next, we ask

them to describe activities in which they encourage their children to participate. They enthusiastically check off a laundry list on their fingers: hockey, soccer, karate, math lessons and music. Pretty normal, right?

There's nothing wrong with these things; they instil confidence and other positive qualities. The catch is most of the activities don't nurture caring and compassion. Few parents ever cite activities, such as appreciating nature or volunteering, that align with the values they hope to instil.

It's also interesting to hear how parents who want to raise empathetic children measure their

kids' success in these activities. With responses such as winning, ranking highly and receiving awards, parents are, unwittingly, gauging their kids' progress against that of others. The irony is that this approach is at odds with the very virtues of compassion and social responsibility that they've told us they want to nurture.

Parents are so busy that they don't always consciously assess their goals in raising kids. But when they do stop to evaluate their values with how much time they actually spend in nurturing them, they see the disconnect, and that's why it's an exercise we encourage you to do.

➤ Some youth experiences have more impact than others. The experience with the greatest impact was seeing a role model help others; 88 per cent of respondents who had had this experience donated later in life.

Source: 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

Nurturing caring, compassionate and socially responsible kids comes down to making difficult life choices; time allocation is the toughest one. The next time you plan out your family's schedule of activities, why not choose at least one thing that teaches these values, such as visiting an older relative or neighbour who lives alone, or joining an ecological club in which social responsibility is valued. When parents measure their children's progress by their personal growth and happiness, as well as their ability to work as part of a team for the greater good of their club, school or community, then their answers to the two questions we pose in our workshops match up.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are the founders of Free the Children and coauthors of Me to We: Finding Meaning in a Material World (Simon and Schuster, 2006) and Me to We: Turning Self-Help on Its Head (John Wiley, 2004).

Get in the Act: Next Steps

- 1 Assess how your kids spend time. If there isn't time for volunteering, what activity can they replace with one that nurtures caring?
- 2 Discuss what it means to "win" or "lose." What if someone puts in 100 per cent effort and still loses, or puts in very little effort and still wins? Or what if someone's team lost a game but had lots of fun playing?
- 3 Find out what issues your children care about. What makes them mad? What inspires their passion? Then think about the opportunities in your community that match with your children's passions and get them involved.