

## Education Matters- Giving Children the Empathy Advantage

The question parents and educators always ask themselves is “What do kids really need to be happy and successful?” It seems lately the message the world has been giving children is to stress personal uniqueness and self-interest. Critics claim that this has created the most entitled, competitive, self-centered and individualistic generation on record. The current rage of taking “selfies” is indicative of this. Is this trend making the world a better place and helping children to be happy and successful? Current research would indicate just the opposite is occurring. Dr. Michele Borba says “The Selfie syndrome is permeating our society and slowly eroding our children’s character.” It is the root cause of bullying, weak moral reasoning, and mental health problems in our students.

Dr. Borba believes that raising children to be empathetic is the key to their future success and well-being. Her book, “Unselfie-Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World”, asserts that empathy can be instilled by teaching habits to practice and live. The Beautiful Plains School Division has empathy as one of its core values. To this end the division has brought Dr. Michelle Borba to Neepawa to speak to educators and parents about how to instill empathy in our children.

One of the first steps for Dr. Borba is to make children aware of their feelings and the feelings of others. Children need to be able to identify and talk about emotions. Simple chats and face to face connections are critical to nurture children’s ability to care. Feelings can’t be learned digitally so unplugged times are critical for families to focus on one another. Sharing meals and limiting screen time are key strategies to help family discussions.

Secondly, it is important to instill a moral identity in children. This can be done by modeling caring and kindness and stressing those attributes over monetary values. It is important to not overpraise or create a “Me First” entitled generation. Next children need to learn to walk in someone else’s shoes. Discipline is a critical step to this. When a child has wronged someone, calling attention to the uncaring behavior and making repairing the hurt the consequence is vital. Spanking, yelling or shaming children makes them less likely to empathize with the victim or those they have hurt. Expressing disappointment rather than anger and stressing caring expectations are critical for children to start to empathize.

Another way to foster empathy is through reading. Choose books or stories with heroes and moral struggles to help children understand how others are feeling and thinking. This gives a venue to talk about caring behaviors and positive solutions. Children also need to develop and practice self-regulation. Children are more stressed, anxious and overwhelmed than ever before. They need to learn self-control and strategies to help them discuss their feelings, become resilient and respond compassionately. Allowing time for quiet reflection and teaching mindful breathing are some ways to help children keep calm. Once children are able to regulate their emotions, they can recognize and help others with their feelings.

It is important to have children work together and collaborate in order to understand others and to develop meaningful relationships with different people. The more varied the groups are in age, gender and culture the more chances that bridges can be built rather than walls. Lastly teaching kindness and empathy lays the foundation for caring and happy children to become caring and successful adults. Empathetic children live one essential truth: We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns and deserve to be treated with dignity. DVD’s of Dr. Borba’s Neepawa presentation can be found at Beautiful Plains schools as well as the Division office.