

SPECIAL

TIME

EDITION

# The Power of Kindness

Creating a Better Life and a Better World

**Small Acts,  
Big Impact**

**Spreading Kindness  
in a Rude World**

**Mastering  
Self-Forgiveness**



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TISP SPECIALS

to mirror a parent who is doing the same. Incredibly, babies even cry more in response to recordings of other babies' crying than to recordings of their own wails.

### EMPATHY THROUGH THE AGES

In early 2020, the University of Washington's Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences (I-LABS) published a study about infant altruism and the evolution of helping behaviors. Could babies act kindly to adults when it cost the babies something, requiring them to subvert their own selfishness to show emotional generosity? Researchers tested this in 19-month-olds who like bananas, pairing them with adults who held a slice of banana and exclaimed how much they loved it too. The adult accidentally fumbled the banana so that it fell onto a tray out of reach of the adult but right in front of the baby.

"If this were a chimp, it would grab the banana and scamper away," says Andrew Meltzoff, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, a co-director of I-LABS and a senior author of the study, published in *Scientific Reports*, a *Nature* open-access journal. "The baby picked up the banana, looked at it longingly, then handed it back to

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the adult. We call this 'costly helping,' doing something to help another even though you have to give up something valuable yourself."

This costly helping is an early form of empathy, something Meltzoff thinks develops because a baby codes other people as being "like me." When a mother shakes a rattle and a baby shakes it back, this exchange is enjoyable because the like-me connection is engaged, posits Meltzoff's theory. The baby giggles and they forge a mutual connection. "This is the bedrock for development of empathy and kindness," says Meltzoff. "One reason we act

empathetic to others is we know what it's like to be like them. Babies are studying us all the time. When babies see us acting kind, they register it. The little acts of kindness that they see and receive help fan the development of empathy, kindness and altruism toward others."

When adults are trying to teach children empathy, it's helpful to be mindful of their cognitive and developmental stage. Around kindergarten, children can start to intuit the feelings of another person, an ability that expands with experience, says Tara Cousineau, a staff psychologist at Harvard University's counseling and mental health services. But that heightened sensitivity can start unspooling in middle school, when displays of empathy may be thwarted as children strive to fit in with the tribe.

"It's a survival skill," says Cousineau, who notes that empathy can be dialed up or down depending on what a particular social situation or stage of life calls for. "We learn empathy through our interactions, which mature and develop over time. Empathy is not linear; it's relational. We can try to teach it, but honestly, we need to demonstrate it."

Things get worse in the teen years, when empathy really takes a beating. It's no secret that teens as a whole are seen as self-centered, concerned almost exclusively with their own needs. Kidd suggests it's helpful to think of teens' narcissistic tendencies as a function of capacity; they can keep track of only so many things at once. When they are newly attending to a lot of other people outside their home and self-organizing their social lives, teens may run out of "slots" for attending to their parents or siblings.

"It's not that they don't care," says Kidd. "Their slots are full." As teens experiment socially and practice modeling friends' intentions, goals and desires, they get better at computing others' reactions. As they experience characteristic teen dramas—typically involving interpersonal upheavals—make mistakes and get surprising reactions, they are continuously able to improve their model of the social world, which spurs them to be kinder to those around them. (As a mom of three teens, I find it a relief to know that there's a point to all the teen drama after all.)

### WHY EMPATHY MATTERS

It might be useful to think of this process of cultivating and modeling empathy as Project Reform Your Feral Child, molding base instincts into pil-