

Life's Building Blocks, Inc.  
Making Character Development Fun



**Virtue of the Month – Kindness**

*The best portion of a good man's life is his little,  
nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.*

—William Wordsworth

*Kind words can be short and easy to speak,  
but their echoes are truly endless.*

—Mother Teresa

*No kind action ever stops with itself. One kind action  
leads to another. Good example is followed. A single act of  
kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring  
up and make new trees. The greatest work that kindness  
does to others is that it makes them kind themselves.*

—Amelia Earhart

**The highlighted virtue for this month is kindness.**

**What is kindness?**

Truly kind people want others to be happy, to be fulfilled, to flourish. They are benevolent, which means they desire the good—the genuine good—for others. They do not merely seek to make others fleetingly happy, or to be pleasant or popular.

Good parents are, often, our best model of kindness. They have a powerful desire to help their children develop meaningful relationships, pursue excellent goals, and become virtuous people. This last point is particularly important. Good parents want their children to flourish, but no one can do so without having good character. So, good parents must also have a strong desire for their children to acquire the virtues.

**Why be kind?**

The books and guides this month attempt to answer this question. In the activity book dialogue, Mr. Lacey explains to Shawnie how the Golden Rule can

be used as a moral test for treating people properly. In Zaki's letter this month, Zaki poses key questions that reveal the universal value of kindness. He asks questions like: What if everyone were kind? What if everyone were mean? What if parents didn't care about their children's well-being? What if friends were more concerned about themselves than others?

All of our friendships and communities depend on kindness, cooperation, and civility. Fortunately, most of us derive great satisfaction from being kind. If you ask a child if he/she wants to be a kind person or a mean person, it's unlikely he or she will say, "Oh, I want to be mean!" Acts of kindness can be "contagious." If you recognize and truly appreciate how kind someone has been to you, you usually want to be kind in return. Often, you try to follow that person's example and are kind to others.

### **Kindness is not merely being nice.**

Children have a difficult time understanding the true meaning of kindness. They tend to think that to be kind means to be *nice*—that is, to be friendly, amiable, indulgent, and generally fun to be around. This is, of course, why they accuse adults of being mean when we don't give them everything they want! One of our greatest challenges as adults is to show children that we don't give them everything they want *because* we want them to flourish. We discipline them, and in doing so, we sometimes frustrate their desires, because we want them not only to feel good, but also to *be* good and virtuous people. In a society as wealthy and materialistic as ours, it's difficult for children to understand that adults who refuse to satisfy their desires, often do so for their ultimate good.

Our children face a similar set of issues with their friends. They will tend to think that being kind to their friends means helping to fulfill all their friends' wishes. (Their friends will try to convince them of that as well!) But by not holding their friends to standards and being unwilling to say "no" to them, our children can actually do their friends harm. Simply put, sometimes people want things that are *bad* for them. To give in to these desires is not true kindness. We need to teach our children to ask themselves, "Am I doing this for my friend because it would really be good for him/her, or am I just giving my friend what I think he/she wants so that he/she will like me?"

There are other pitfalls to being simply "nice." When our kids are too nice, they can become "pushovers"—people who never stand up for themselves, always give in when others insist on having things their way, and never ask (let alone demand) just and fair treatment. Pushovers lack self-respect. Children need to learn where the line is between being a kind person and being a "doormat."

### **Kindness can be a complicated virtue.**

Some children will face a different obstacle to becoming genuinely kind. These kids have such a strong desire to help their friends that they risk becoming pushy "busybodies." It's never a good idea to boss people around, constantly telling them what to do "for their own good." Author C. S. Lewis once described a lady "who went around doing good: you could tell those she did good to by their hunted look." The people he described clearly wished their benefactor was a little less interested in their well-being and a little more concerned with her own!

Being kind, then, consists of a difficult balancing act: We must want to help others, but we also cannot do so by simply giving them what they want. At the same time, we can't just ignore what others want and impose our desires on them. This is not an easy thing to do. In fact, our children will all be working on this part of their character for the rest of their lives . . . as will we!

### **Related Virtues**

The virtue of kindness is closely related to other character traits such as mercy, generosity, and gratitude.

Mercy means not punishing others even when we have a right to do so. If someone has done me wrong (for example, has broken my toy), then I have the right to punish that person (by making him/her pay for repairs). If I don't punish that person, I am showing mercy. Kind people tend to be merciful.

Generosity is a willingness to give good things to others, such as time, money, or care. Kind people tend to be generous. Remember, however, that kind and generous people are committed to the genuine fulfillment of others. They give for the right reasons—not in hopes of being paid back in the future, but out of care for, love for, or respect for others.

Gratitude is an attitude of thankfulness for acts done by other people that contribute to our well-being. Adults can encourage children to develop a thankful attitude by frequently pointing out the ways that others help them and reminding them to express their thanks. Training children to express gratitude in this way eventually teaches them to have genuine appreciation for the kindness of others.

### **Kindness helps us notice those in need.**

Like all of the virtues, kindness shapes the way we see the world. Because kind people are committed to the well-being of others, they are attuned to those in need and notice them when others do not. For example, in *The Contest*, Kind Shawnie notices that Cassie is in need and commits to helping her, whereas

Jarrett the Just initially sees someone who might get him in trouble at school. What we see and what we don't see is a crucial indicator of the virtues we have, and those we lack.

*One of the most effective ways to teach our children to be kind is to encourage them to pay attention to the needs of others.* Children are often extremely self-absorbed and will not usually notice others unless those people are preventing them from getting what they want. It is vital for us to help our children pay attention to others—and not just to the popular kids, but also to the quiet ones who sit by themselves at lunchtime or play by themselves on the playground. Of course, as with all virtues, if we are to develop kindness in our children, we ourselves must also be kind!

### **Questions to ask your children this month:**

- What does it mean to be kind?
- Who is the kindest person you know?
- What is the kindest thing you've done this week?
- Are other people *always* being unkind when they don't give you something you want?
- Have you ever wanted something that was bad for you?
- Is it okay for someone to give you something that's bad for you?
- What does it mean to be merciful?
- Should you always be punished when you knowingly break a rule?
- Should other people always be punished when they do something that's mean or unfair to you?
- Have you ever asked an adult *not* to punish someone who wronged you?
- What does it mean to be generous?
- How can you be generous?
- When was the last time you gave something away that you really wanted for yourself? (This can be time, money, possessions, attention, and so on.)