

Gwynne Spencer
PO Box 121
299 South Spruce
Mancos CO 81328
(970) 533-7484
(970) 533-9183 fax
gwynnespencer@aol.com

LOVE 101: Building Compassion in Kids

Although scientific debate still rages on the topic of nurture vs. nature, I am of the opinion that the human animal is naturally violent. Other than outlawing testosterone, I just don't know any way around it. In one study of violence on the preschool playground, researchers found that the children who were denied toy guns (and other weapons) initiated four times as many aggressive incidents in play as those kids who were allowed "warmongering" toys. I've even heard from teachers about kids in classrooms who chewed their graham crackers into the shape of guns if they were denied toy weaponry. Go figure.

Here are some ways for today's parents to build a meaningful reservoir of empathy in their kids in spite of a world filled with rage and lunacy.

1. Whenever there is an act of violence on television, turn the thing off for an hour. Your family will watch approximately seven seconds of TV a day.
2. Ban video games of all kinds, not just because of their violence but because time that is spent intently gaming is NOT socializing the young animal.
3. Teach your children the power of advertising by launching your own ad campaign that assures them they are NOT going to be empowered by a visit to Wal-mart, nor are they ratcheted up the humanitarian scale by recycling their cell phones. Buy less, be more.
4. Read them stories of compassion and kindness and selflessness like

Somebody Loves You Mr. Hatch by Eileen Spinelli (Aladdin, 1996, \$5.99)

Andy and the Lion by James Daughtery (Viking Press, 1938, \$12.95)

Home of the Brave, by Allen Say (Houghton Mifflin, 2002, \$17)

Charlotte's Web by E.B. White (now available in a 50th anniversary retrospective unabridged audio cd collection, Listening Library, 2002, \$27)

1. Plug your kids into great audio in the car. We highly recommend everything by Raffi,

and storyteller Jim Weiss, as well as the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park and Harry Potter tapes (the movies leave so much out!)

2. Instead of self-indulgent commercially powered kidflix filled with gratuitous action-adventure that produces only adrenaline (not compassion), feed their brains on movies like: *The Secret of Roan Inish*, *Contact*, *Bambi* (before Disney's main purpose was selling lunchboxes), *The Black Stallion*, *ET*, *NeverEnding Story*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Simon Burch*, *Shrek*, *Emmet Otter's Jug Band Christmas*.
3. Implement service learning programs in schools to channel energy otherwise wasted on sports. For more information, contact: Kid2KidProject, <www.icrichild.org>
4. Have kids earn their allowance, not by doing household chores which they ought to be doing for free anyway, but on the basis of altruistic and anonymous acts of benevolence committed in the home, in the neighborhood and in the school.
5. With all that time NOT spent on TV and videogaming, your kids will have lots of time to read, building vicarious experience which is the very foundation of compassion. Feed them terrific books by Mem Fox, Rosemary Wells, Katherine Paterson, Steven Kellogg, Karen Cushman, Donna Jo Napoli, Cynthia Rylant, Beverly Cleary, Karen Hesse, Jerry Spinelli. (For a list of 101 Books Every Peaceable Kid Ought to Read, send \$2 and a self-addressed stamped envelope to 101 List, PO Box 121, Mancos CO 81328)
6. Insist on an hour a week (minimum) of volunteer service at the library or school, homeless shelter or dog pound, nursing home or local clinic, making the world a better place. Grab a copy of *The Kid's Guide to Service Projects: Over 500 Ideas for Young People Who Want to Make a Difference* by Barbara Lewis (Free Spirit Publishing, \$12.95).

Kids who grow up with a constant drone of aphorisms like "Of those to whom much is given, much is required" and "You make a living by what you get but you make a life by what you give" have the baseline expectation that they will help make the world a better place, not relentlessly pursue their own self-interest. I'm sure that someday, it will all be clear to them that doing good is like brushing your teeth—you can't just do it once in a while.

Gwynne Spencer is author of *RECIPES FOR READING*, which unites picture books and recipes, and *HAVE TALENT WILL TRAVEL*, a set of directories that unites authors, illustrators and storytellers with schools and libraries who would like them to visit (Linworth Publishing, 800/786-5017) and the mother of two grownups, both of whom work at full-time jobs making the world a better place. She invites your comments at gwynnespencer@aol.com