

It's The Season to be Generous

The days before the new year holidays are the time of the year when we fill up the markets looking for gifts for friends and relatives. This often requires long days away from our children, returning to them with exhaustion from all the bargaining and decision making. It is the season for generosity, but are our children getting the message? How can we help them feel the joy of generosity not just in this season but throughout the year?

Some practical ideas:

- Help children develop the habit of thinking about what other people need and what makes them happy. You can make this into a guessing game as you walk in the park or go shopping together. Ask your child “What do you think would help the tired shopkeeper now?”, “What do you think would make your teacher happy?”, “What would cheer up your sick friend?”, “What would make the crying baby in the street calm down?”, “What can we send Grandma to make her smile?”. This builds a habit in children to look for and become aware of opportunities for generous service. Often the greatest need people have is for a friendly chat and a loving touch. It is, therefore, necessary to talk to children about a broadened concept of generosity. One which is not limited to giving money and buying gifts, rather one that includes giving of our time, talents, ideas and most importantly love and compassion.

The following idea from *The Virtues Project Educator's Guide* is a great way to emphasize this broader understanding of generosity in children:

Together with your children, decorate small recycled boxes or tissue containers for each family member. Make some paper hearts and invite every member to write on each heart a gift they wish to give others, such as an act of service (washing the dishes, setting the table), or a toy they wish to share for a day. Each person places their heart shaped papers in his/her box. In special gift giving times, or when they feel moved to give a gift of love, they can let someone take a heart out of their box and give them an opportunity to be generous. The boxes can also be placed under the Christmas tree.

- When children show the desire to be generous, support them to realize their desire in action. Small children need our encouragement and sometimes assistance to achieve this. Help him bake a cookie for his teacher, mail her drawing for Grandma, and accompany him to give a toy to a needy child. For some projects, the whole family can get involved. For example: cleaning the house for an old neighbor, becoming a second family for a lonely student, babysitting a friend's child to give her a break. Plan for these activities together as a family and afterwards, talk about the experience. Acts of generosity help children taste the joy of practicing this virtue. Once they have experienced it, they would like to do it again.
- Keep in mind that generosity like other virtues is practiced by choice. It needs to come from inside for it to be meaningful and build character. It should be encouraged but not forced. Sometimes a child does not want to share his new toy with his visiting friend or relative. It causes hurt feelings in the visiting child and his/her parents. To save ourselves from the embarrassment, we desperately try different means to force our

children to share their belongings. It usually starts by gently advising them to be generous, if not successful, it soon escalates to bribing, threatening and any other means that can save us. While this may help achieve our goal, it does not develop generosity in the child, neither does it enhance unity among the children involved. Instead, it is helpful to plan for family gatherings or visits ahead of time. Ask your child which toys he is willing to be generous with when her relatives or friends arrive. Help her put these in a box or an accessible place ahead of time. When the guests arrive, she would feel empowered to show friendliness and generosity with her toys and belongings. If there are especially fragile or delicate ones which he does not want to share with others, respect his decision and help put those away before the guests arrive. In the event that you have surprise visitors, teach him how to use gentle and kind words to let others know which toys they can and cannot play with. For example: he can gently take the fragile toy away saying: "I am sorry. This one is very delicate and might break. Let's play with this other one instead" while kindly guiding the child to another toy that can safely be shared. After the guests leave, take time to acknowledge your child's efforts to practice generosity even if you felt it was not enough. Acknowledgement of a virtue helps its development and growth in time.

- During gift giving festivals, help children become excited about *giving* rather than receiving. If your child is giving a gift, encourage him to give freely from the heart without expectation of recognition and return or concern about how the gift will be used. And remember to model this yourself, too. If you bought a big birthday gift for your child's classmate, do not have the expectation to receive a big gift from her when your child's birthday comes around. And try to be detached if you see the special gift you bought for one friend given away to another one. Children observe and absorb our actions and reactions. Our gift giving attitudes set the standard of generosity for them.
- Inspire children to strive for greater levels of generosity through sharing real stories of acts of generosity and sacrifice by family members and others. The following real story is excerpted from the '*Virtues in Action*' *Generosity* book by The Children's Virtues Development Project.

"Roja had a simple birthday at home with her family who had all contributed a little money to buy her a new winter coat. She thought it was the most beautiful coat she had ever seen. As a special birthday surprise they took her for dinner. . .As they all walked happily back to the car, Roja noticed a little girl on the street . She looked to be about the same age as Roja. But she was dirty, cold and alone. Roja's eyes stayed fixed on her as she slowly approached the car with her hands stretched out, as if asking for something. Roja, her brothers and parents searched the car for some fruit or something healthy to give to the little girl. But on that day they had nothing. Roja noticed the girl's runny nose and kindly offered her a tissue. The little girl walked away wiping her nose and her tears. Roja sat silent and then said to her mother "Mommy, that little girl is sick because she is cold, may I give her my new coat, please?" A proud smile spread across her mother's face. "If that is what you want to do, of course you may." Roja jumped out of the car and ran towards the little girl, taking off her coat as she went. She wrapped the coat around the girl's shoulders and came back to the car. Roja smiled and began to shiver. Her

younger brother Kamal who noticed that Roja was cold took off his coat and wrapped it kindly around her shoulders.”

By Shiva Yan
The Children’s Virtues Development Project