

Teach Your Children Empathy

Author Jillian Haslam's is an extraordinary story of courage. Despite growing up in the depths of extreme poverty, she carved a life for herself as a philanthropist and motivational speaker. Taking a cue from her life, she exhorts parents to instil empathy in their children.

The child is the father of the man.

Our children today grow up in the midst of a technology-driven consumerist boom, the like of which was beyond the wildest human imagination some years back. They have a surfeit of information, and myriad kinds of exposure, so one would imagine they would grow up a lot smarter than their parents.

But is that true? Do the children of today really know their world? Do they know that more than 70 per cent of the world's population does not have access to the Internet? The figure is less

than 15 per cent for India. There is so much more they don't know, safely ensconced in their world of school, homework, tennis lessons, Internet chatting, video games and annual holidays. One could argue that they don't really need to know the other side since it does not impinge on theirs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This is one world, and these are fellow human beings with aspirations and ambitions, and they vastly outnumber the better-off sections of the society. Unless you accept them as equals, and take them along in your journey towards ever increasing prosperity, there will be severe repercussions

in the shape of crime and social unrest. Purely from a moral and spiritual standpoint too, the current nonchalance of the rich and well-to-do towards those not as fortunately placed is not tenable.

Children need to be encouraged to engage with the poor and the underprivileged at a deeper level. This can only happen when parents believe that this is necessary, and lead by example. If a child understands that the price of a single meal in a fancy restaurant could feed a poor family for a year or finance the education of a poor labourer's child for a year, he would be able to view life around him from a different perspective.

The difference between hunger and diseases, and dizzying success and wealth, often boils down to the availability of opportunity and what one makes of them. That is why there are so many spectacular rags to riches stories. I happen to be one such individual who has both seen the depths of extreme poverty and deprivation and a life of privilege and wealth. Today the world knows me as a highly successful London-based businesswoman and philanthropist. This is a world removed from my childhood in the slums of Kolkata as a semi-destitute from a desperately poor family of British descent. We were so poor that four of our siblings died due to hunger and malnutrition. The others barely survived by begging for food, living off people's kindness, while at the same time suffering extreme racist abuse. Yet it was the same equally desperately poor people who saved our lives by the occasional kindness they showed us.

My little sister and I were lucky that a leading Kolkata school took us in for free. School was a tough proposition for us because

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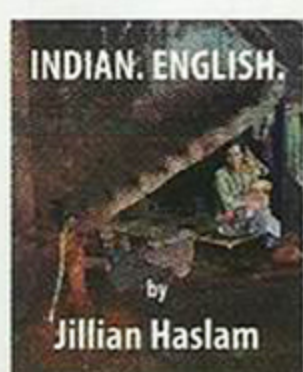
of our poor financial background which caused us to have a host of psychological issues. But if we did extricate ourselves it was because we finally had hope. I crafted a successful banking career for myself in India and England, while my younger sisters beat all odds too by topping their universities and becoming teachers themselves.

Today it is my life's mission to give motivational talks to people enabling them to grapple with their problems. I do that in England and back home in India for people from all kinds of backgrounds—corporate honchos, children from elite public schools, children from impoverished backgrounds and others. I use examples from my own life to inspire them. In Kolkata I took Mohit, a boy suffering from cerebral palsy, to a lecture I gave at the elite Kolkata International School. It was an eye-opening experience. While Mohit drew strength and inspiration from the warm welcome, the students hailing from very privileged backgrounds got to understand that there's more to life.

Our children need to know and respect the diversity of circumstances that bedevil human existence. This will make them grow up to be well informed and genuinely empathetic individuals. Even within their daily routine where the differences are not so stark, they could try not to be ostentatious. One does not know what sort of havoc one may unknowingly be wreaking on other children in one's peer group who don't have the wherewithal to afford a similar lifestyle. One cannot predict as to what means such children may adopt in their attempt to keep up. Rather than being a Rihanna or Shah Rukh Khan clone they should enhance their own strength and forge a

unique identity. All this business of creating fake avatars on Facebook and other social media sites is just a manifestation of this trying-to-be-somebody-else malaise. Children and young adults need to be taught to use their competitive spirit in a positive sense to embellish who they are, and this can be taught in no better a place than what we all call home.

I would like to press the point that children with a heightened sense of empathy will have a natural flair for camaraderie and a surer sense of their own self worth. They are more likely to grow up to be better-adjusted and well-rounded individuals well suited to the 21st century. There is great benefit in opening the eyes of a child. It teaches virtues such as compassion, love, admiration, togetherness, sharing, giving, hoping and succeeding, and that in the end will benefit the family, the school, the city and ultimately the country. Isn't that inspiration? Isn't that a gift that you would like your child to remember you for? Remember, people will forget what you give them, people will forget what you tell them but people will never forget how you make them feel. Leave behind a true legacy that could never be forgotten, a legacy of what you made your child feel for others, a legacy of kindness and humility. There is no bigger gift that you can impart to your child than that! ☘



JILLIAN HASLAM is the author of the book *Indian. English.* ₹240, Mehta Publishing House

Encourage Charity

Parents can help their kids by proactively participating in philanthropic and charitable activities, creating appropriate templates of behaviour for them to follow.

* Taking up a cause and involving kids in distributing food packets, books and medicines a couple of times a week in the locality where one's domestic helpers live, would sensitize them. You could also look at financing the medical insurance needs of these children.

* Older children can join hands with their friends and start giving basic English lessons to the children of their helpers, or talk to them about hygiene.

* Children could visit kids suffering with thalassaemia and understand just how valuable it is to be alive. Your kids can impart hope and love to these children, using no money at all.

* Children can visit old-age homes, mental homes, orphanages, and homes for the destitute. Old people enjoy talking to kids, hearing them read, telling them about their own lives, and using their help. I used to visit a home for the deaf and dumb girls and communicate without a word being exchanged; we managed to become the greatest of friends just by writing on paper.

* Ask 10 kids to collect clothes, toys, biscuits, sweets, books and pens for an orphanage.