

Teaching empathy to our children

By Laura Hodges Poole

Recently, my son Josh and I were surfing the Internet for a particular charity he was interested in. With the click of the mouse, we made a contribution, and he was off to his next activity. But something troubled me about this. It had been too easy to click and run.

My husband and I had been fairly successful in instilling empathy in Josh for those less fortunate. He understands their plight. But I wondered, does he feel it? Do children today grasp the hardships facing those who are barely getting by? How can they, if their own lives are not impacted by this suffering?

Helping others is simple when you write a check and drop it in the mail, or better yet, go online and donate with a click of the mouse. But our children are easily misled by the instantaneous process of helping someone without physically being involved. That kind of giving makes it hard for a child to develop a true servant's heart and show Christ's love to a fallen world.

With so many demands upon working parents, though, it's difficult to carve out time to physically minister to others. But when we don't, we lose opportunities for teaching empathy to our children.

Also, school activities and sports vie for our children's attention. When they have free time, children are too often plugged into and saturated by electronic media. Television scenes depicting starvation, homelessness, and calamities are so routine that children are desensitized to the suffering they see without experiencing it firsthand. Regular, hands-on activities are necessary for them to develop true empathy for others in need.

The Bible teaches, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned." (Titus 1:7-8a).



I got up from the computer that day resolving that Josh's concept of helping others wouldn't begin and end with a click of the mouse, writing a check, or the occasional drop at Goodwill. Sure, we participate in Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child and drop coins into the Salvation Army buckets each Christmas. But we needed to be involved in helping the less fortunate regularly, locally, and in a hands-on way. As a Christian parent, it is my responsibility to teach my children the integrity of doing God's work.

After inquiring about the needs of a local food pantry, Josh and I headed to a grocery store to buy canned goods and bread. At the pantry, we saw impoverished people standing in line, barely making eye contact or nodding as we came in. A few thanked us or said, "God bless you," as we walked out. Back in our minivan, I knew the seed had been planted when Josh said, "Mom, did you see how poor those people looked?"

I wanted to do more. Our church youth group feeds the homeless and disadvantaged in a parking lot downtown on Monday evenings. Josh and I baked cookies and arrived that Monday, ready to lend a hand. As we handed out hamburgers and drinks, I observed the impression the experience was having on Josh. He responded to the nuances of people's personalities, some cordial but quiet, others talkative, but all taking their food with a "thank you" or "God bless." Many hung around and chatted while we refilled their plates and cups. Although it was a hot summer afternoon in an asphalt parking lot, the time went quickly and no one seemed to mind the discomfort. After all, most of the people we served lived

outdoors most of the time.

During the drive home, Josh and I discussed the disadvantaged people we had met. He had been particularly impacted by the street-savvy children whose lives were so different from his. Several had ridden up on old, rusty bikes, none of which matched its rider in size. For the first time, Josh had been amongst children who needed his help. They weren't from faraway countries but from right here in the backyard of our small town in South Carolina.

The experience opened Josh's eyes more than any television program ever could. He had felt the plight of the disadvantaged. He understood it by experiencing firsthand the implications of their life situations. And he was eager to return the following Monday.

Despite our family schedules, finding even occasional opportunities and time to participate in service projects is not difficult. Involvement takes purposeful living. Modeling the concept of physically ministering to others is an essential step toward instilling empathy in our children. It's critical to their spiritual development. ROC

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