



THE STATE OF KINDNESS ACCORDING TO KIDS

Caring, Compassion, and Empathy in the Next Generation



It's never been easy to raise caring, empathetic children. But perhaps it's never been harder.

In today's world, we are confronted with almost daily images of intolerance and conflict all around us—on TV, in movies, and in the news. We see unkind encounters play out in our personal lives as we engage on athletic fields, in restaurants and stores, and while riding in our cars. And that made us wonder: how much of this are kids seeing—and

how is it influencing their thinking about how we talk to and behave toward one another?

For these reasons, we chose kindness and empathy as the theme of our **ninth annual Highlights State of the Kid survey**. We asked kids—the world's most important people: What messages are they hearing from their parents and the other adults in their lives about the importance of kindness? Are they hearing that adults value caring

Meet Our Thought Leaders

Christine French Cully is

the editor in chief of Highlights, where she leads the company's mission to elevate the voice of children and encourage fellow parents and adults to commit to helping kids grow to become their best selves. She helps ensure every child's letter and email that comes through the Highlights door and inbox is read and responded to, penning many letters herself—because every child's voice matters.



Luba Falk Feigenberg, Ed.D. is a

developmental psychologist and researcher. She serves as research adviser to the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her professional experience spans the academic, social service, and nonprofit sectors, including early childhood education, juvenile justice, after school, and community mental health. Her work has been featured in multiple national outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, National Public Radio, and *Fast Company*.



Sasha L. Ribic, Psy.D. is a licensed

clinical psychologist in Columbus, Ohio. She provides psychotherapy for children, adolescents, and adults, and provides varied psychoeducational programs and parenting seminars within Central Ohio.

Ribic utilizes an Adlerian psychological perspective to inform her work, which stresses the need for community and connection for maintaining mental health and wellness. Her work is collaborative and interactive with an emphasis on each individual's strengths and resiliencies. She is a socially responsible practitioner, who respects and celebrates human diversity and difference.





“I hope, as time passes, more and more people will be imaginative and open-minded toward the things around them.”

—Girl, age 12

We want to help kids understand that thinking about the common good and not only our own personal happiness enables us to be change agents and gives us the power to change the world for the better.”

We’re pleased to give kids a national platform from which their voices can be heard. By adding insights and actionable takeaways from child development experts, Luba Falk Feigenberg, Ed.D. and Sasha Ribic, Psy.D., who have spent years studying the impact of kindness and compassion on children and the community at large, we aim to support parents in helping their kids become their best selves—curious, creative, caring, and confident.

In the report that follows, you’ll find a wealth of information, as kids tell us their views on kindness and empathy and what they think their parents believe is most important. We also offer tips for parents who want to pass these values on to their kids, and, of course, memorable comments from kids themselves. We hope our survey results will fuel the ongoing parenting conversation about raising kids who practice kindness and empathy in their lives.

behaviors? Do kids witness their parents or other adults behaving rudely, and, if so, how does it make them feel? Does our next generation understand what it means to be empathetic?

We asked 2,000 kids, ages six to twelve, from around the country questions like these and more. Their answers—received in a year of great political divide, diminishing civility in passionate national conversations, an increase in violent protests and racial strife, not to mention devastating natural disasters—revealed insights that both surprised and reassured us.

In the words of Christine French Cully, editor in chief of Highlights: “A wealth of research supports the idea that people with high emotional intelligence—people who are caring and empathetic—are more likely to be both successful and happy in life.

We want to help kids understand that thinking about the common good gives us the power to change the world for the better.



How Kids View Kindness—and What They Think Matters Most to Their Parents

First things first: What type of messages about kindness are we currently sending kids? Do they see being kind as a priority? To find out, we asked kids what they think is most important to their parents: that they are happy, do well in school, or are kind. Almost half (44%) responded that their happiness matters most to their parents (higher with 11- to 12-year-olds at 49%); a third (33%) chose doing well in school (6- to 10-year-olds think school success is more important to their parents compared to older kids); followed

What do you think is most important to your parents, that you're happy, do well in school, or are kind?

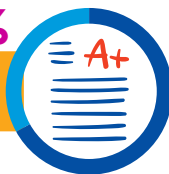


44%

that I'm happy

33%

that I do well in school



23%

that I'm kind



“I would change how people are treated because all people deserve love.”

—Girl, age 9

by just under a quarter (23%) saying that they're kind. Parents, you may think that the kindness message—being a good person with strong values—is getting through to your kids, but the survey data shows that kids think otherwise.

Are parents sending the message that kindness matters?

“From research at the Making Caring Common project, parents are telling us that they want their children to be caring and empathetic and have concern for other people, but the Highlights State of the Kid survey results show that's not the message that kids are hearing,” says Luba Falk Feigenberg, Ed.D., developmental psychologist and research adviser to the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She continues, “Kids are hearing that parents want them to be focused on achievement. It's tough because there are so many messages

about individual success and achievement in particular that overpower the messages parents think they are actually sending about being caring and kind.”

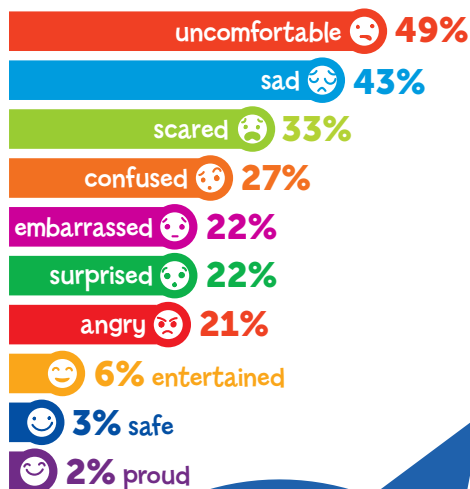
Cully adds, “Maybe part of the message we aren't always sending to our kids is that yes, we want you to be happy, but part of being happy means thinking about the needs of others sometimes.” Feigenberg agrees, “These three things are not mutually exclusive. It's important to achieve and be successful in the ways you hope to be. It's important to be happy and fulfilled. And it's important to care about other people.”

Muddying the picture: many kids are quite aware of adults behaving badly toward others, and may have caught their own parents in the act. In our survey, a majority of children



polled (68%) told us that they have seen their parents or adults acting unkindly or saying mean things, primarily in the car (36%), followed by on the phone (27%), and watching TV (24%). And it's affecting them—93% of kids who responded had a negative reaction from witnessing this misbehavior: 49% of kids said it made them feel uncomfortable, 43% felt sad, followed by 33% responding they felt scared and 27% felt confused. Some kids (22%) said it made them feel embarrassed, 22% said surprised, and 21% said they got angry.

When you see your parents or other adults being unkind or saying mean things, how do you feel?



“I’m just eleven, but I would love to change how people treat each other. They need to be kind. They need to smile.”

—Girl, age 11

Of course, frustration is normal whenever events don't go as planned in the busy lives we all lead, and that provokes emotions: someone cuts you off in traffic or cuts in line in front of you at the store—and you react negatively. “Sometimes we think it's easier not to discuss a negative, emotional response or an overreaction with our children,” admits Cully, “but often kids see and hear more than we think. This may be particularly true today—in our current climate where incivility seems more frequent and more evident everywhere. When parents mess up, we need to ‘own it.’” Cully continues, “It can be very powerful for a child to hear a parent say, ‘Wow. I made a mistake. I wish I hadn't said or done that.’”

On the plus side, though, incidents like these can be a great wake-up call for parents. “Children are awesome at observing their surroundings,” says Sasha Ribic, Psy.D., a practicing clinical psychologist in central Ohio. “They learn so much about the world and how to interact with others just by observing their parents and other trusted adults. Many of the children responded that the adults were in the car or watching TV when they were acting unkindly. Adults are more likely to be unkind when they do not have direct contact with the other person. It sure is easy to make a mean comment about other drivers when they can't hear you! Though it is important for parents to recognize that whether or not you are directly

impacting another person, unkind statements are just that.”

“More than ever, we need to be reminded that our children are watching,” adds Cully.

Takeaway

Kindness Lessons Can Be Caught (and Taught)

When you act unkindly and your kids witness it, circle back and have a conversation with them about it. Explain your feelings at the moment, how you reflected on your mistake, and made amends. This will go a long way in helping kids understand that we are not perfect, nor do we expect perfection from them.

Use everyday moments to teach a kindness lesson.

For instance, in addition to asking your kids about their day when they come home from school or at dinner, ask them if they did something kind today. Or did someone do something kind for them?

Use mealtime conversations to highlight your family values.

Perhaps similar to a company's mission and values statement, you could come up with a list of family values and priorities and display it in a common space at home. Let your children know that qualities such as hard work, kindness, tolerance, and honesty are valued in your home.



Are Kids Hiding Their Feelings?

We asked kids if it is ever OK to be mean. We felt reassured by how they answered, with the majority (79%) of kids agreeing that it's never OK to be unkind to others. Some (17%) feel it's OK when someone else is mean to them first. Then we wondered what the implications are in terms of kids being able to stay true to themselves, being able to express their opinions and feelings openly and honestly. Did their answers suggest that they are conflict averse?

How can we teach our kids to stick up for themselves without being afraid of hurting the other person's feelings? "Conflict doesn't have to be bad," says Feigenberg. "It can bring

relationships closer. Avoiding it provides a missed opportunity to be open, and hear new ideas and thoughts." We need to teach our children that having a different opinion doesn't mean that you have to act unkindly toward that person. "Teaching children how to manage conflict is key in their ability to navigate relationships throughout their lifetime, whether it's with a good friend, a teacher, or a coworker," explains Ribic.

Parents can help children understand that people can disagree and still love

"I would want everyone to get along and accept one another. We are all different and that is what makes people amazing!"

—Boy, age 7

and care about each other. Feigenberg advises, "Perhaps, after an argument, say, 'I know you saw us arguing earlier. We both have very strong feelings and we were really upset. We raised our voices, and I know that can be scary. We were really trying to work it out. At the end of the day, we still love and care about each other, and we were just trying to figure out how we were going to find a way to agree or work together on this issue.'"

Takeaway

Model Conflict Resolution

Help your child understand that conflict is part of everyday life. Point out conflicts on a television show or at the grocery store and talk about how the situations were resolved. Remind kids of times at home when your family members had differences of opinion, say, whether to go biking or hiking on the weekend, and how you reached a satisfying conclusion.

Talk about how resolving conflict does not mean that we will all agree in the end.

It means we are coming to an understanding of each other's feelings and respecting them. Listening to another's point of view is important.



Kindness and Empathy Go Hand-in-Hand

Empathy is a key ingredient of kindness. And to be kind to others, kids need to be able to understand the other person and his or her perspective. To gauge whether or not kids understand the concept of empathy, we asked them what it means to “put yourself in another person’s shoes.” We were delighted to learn that most kids (67%) understand the empathetic notion of being able to see things as others do, with only 14%, higher among younger kids, responding that they did not know.

What are some ways parents can help young kids understand kindness and empathy, even in difficult situations? Parents can help very young children begin to understand the concept

of empathy by giving them an emotional vocabulary, advises Cully. “Young children need to learn language to express and share their own feelings,” she notes. “The ability to recognize their own feelings and discuss their emotions is the first step to learning how to understand the feelings of others.”

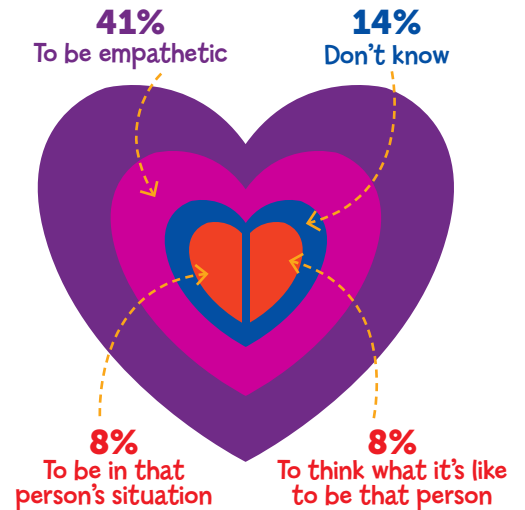
Ribic explains: “You can say to your child, ‘I can see that you are sad that your toy broke. I’m sorry that you are sad.’ We can also

talk with our children about what others might be feeling, such as how a friend might feel if she had no one to sit with at lunchtime or whose family was going through a tough time. It can also be helpful to teach kids how to use ‘I statements,’ to express and discuss feelings with others, learning to say, for example, ‘I was

“To try to be the other kid.”

—Boy, age 8

What does it mean to “put yourself in another person’s shoes”?



sad that you didn’t invite me to your sleepover.”

“The best thing parents can do—regardless of the age of their child—is to model what it means to be kind and empathetic,” says Cully. “A child’s first and most important teacher is the parent. Parents who want to teach kindness and empathy need to model kindness and empathy for their kids. There’s also great value in literature. When we read stories to children, we give them the opportunity to understand a story from the perspective of the characters. When kids hear stories, they are transported out of their own reality and exposed to experiences that are not their own—and, in this way, learn respect for the experiences of others. And there is a treasure trove of stories that feature appealing characters well worth children emulating because they are kind, exhibit moral courage, and are sensitive to the needs of others.”

Takeaway

Think About the Perspective of Others

Acknowledge that it’s not always easy to be kind, that sometimes issues raise feelings in us that aren’t pleasant. But it’s important to think about the other person’s perspective and experiences and then, together, come up with strategies on the best ways to help, whether it’s joining a group that does service work around that issue, such as disaster relief, or writing a letter to an elected official to advocate on behalf of that issue.

Use literature, movies, even games to show your children how other people live. This way, they can begin to understand feelings of empathy for others.





Honesty or Kindness: Kids Understand It's Complicated

Children who answered our survey acknowledge that both kindness and honesty are important, but kids say it's more important to be honest than kind—60% versus 40%. While the hard stats suggest that kids value honesty over kindness, the “why” behind the responses tells us a different story. Kids understand how complex this concept is, and it's something that adults wrestle with daily.

“Honesty tells you what you need to hear; kindness tells you what you want to hear.”

—Boy, age 7

The top three reasons for honesty? Twenty-three percent say being honest is something they feel they should always do, 18% say they feel lying gets people in trouble, and 11% chime in that it's simply beneficial to be honest. On the flip side, 21% of kids value kindness over honesty because they don't want to hurt others' feelings, followed by 10% claiming that it's beneficial to be kind, and another 10% weighing in that being kind makes you honest.

Why did many kids favor honesty over kindness?

“Overall, I think that honesty is a major concept in childhood development,” says Rubic. “Children are learning about fantasy versus reality, and truth

Takeaway

Is Honesty Always the Best Policy?

Remind your kids that the “truth” is often subjective. Point out that whether or not they like someone's outfit or haircut is really a matter of opinion. Tell them to think first about the statement they'll make and how it may impact the recipient.

Let your kids know there are lots of ways to be kind and not lie. Talk through different scenarios with your kids and show them that the way you respond—your approach, your tone of voice, and your willingness to listen—can make a difference. Equip them with language and strategies.

telling versus fibbing. Parents encourage (or demand) that their children tell them the truth, reinforcing the idea that truth telling is ‘good’ and lying is ‘bad.’ However, as adults, we know that there is a subtlety to honesty. We know that by sometimes being incredibly honest and blunt, we may be hurtful to another person.”

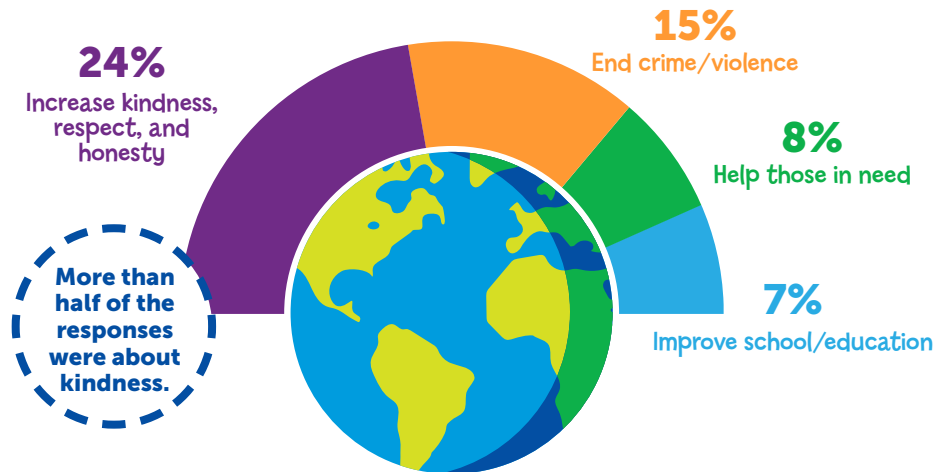
Rubic continues, “I think over time, it is important to teach our children to be honest, but to have tact. We need to be sensitive to the feelings of other individuals and add a little compassion in with our honesty.”



Kids Want a Kinder World

We revisited a question we asked kids in 2010: if they could change one thing in the world, what would they change and why? Seven years ago, most children cited saving the environment. This year, we received many different answers, but overall, one theme rang true: kids want the world to be a kinder, more respectful place (24%); they want everyone to be nicer to one another. Fifteen percent of those who responded specifically cited ending crime and violence, and 8% wanted to help those in need—stop world hunger and end homelessness. Another 7% focused on improving education—wanting to end

If you could change one thing in the world, what would you change?



bullying, do away with homework, and change school hours.

How can we help our kids remain positive and hopeful about the future?

"We believe that children are hardwired for kindness and empathy," says Cully. "How many

times have you seen a baby offer you his bottle or his blanket? Kids are born with the seeds of empathy and kindness. But if we don't water these seeds as children grow, their inborn humanity will fade away."

We all know that kids are fantastic observers and mimics. They learn what they live and what they see lived around them. If parents aren't actively, intentionally teaching kindness and empathy, a child's instincts to be kind and loving can be quickly eroded by conflicting messages they receive elsewhere—messages of hate, intolerance, and selfishness.

"Children are aware now more than ever that there is unkindness in the world," says Ribic. "As parents, we need to be available to talk with children about the images that they are seeing, in an attempt to help them make sense of sometimes



"I would end world hunger and make world peace. I couldn't pick one because they both are very important."

—Girl, age 10





senseless acts. However, we also need to make sure that we are pointing out positive displays of community and connection, as there is a lot of good around us.”

“Our kids learn a lot of important skills and fortitude in their lives from experiencing

We also need to make sure that we are pointing out positive displays of community and connection, as there is a lot of good around us.

things that are hard or aren’t perfect,” says Feigenberg. It’s important to let kids know that things can be confusing and a little scary and overwhelming, but they can always come to you and tell you how they are feeling and you can talk and think about it together. Discuss ways you can effect change within your larger community, whether that’s your neighborhood, your school, your city, or your country, advises Feigenberg. “Helping kids see themselves as change makers is a really important thing for them as they move out into the world,” she concludes.

Takeaway

Accentuate the Positive

Find ways to focus on happiness or boost happiness through gratitude. Recognizing and being thankful for what we have and feeling good about it is one way. Have children keep a gratitude journal. At dinner or before bedtime, ask your child to share one thing he was thankful for that day.

Whenever possible, point out people in the world—your neighborhood, your community, your school—who are doing good deeds.

Save news stories about heroes who’ve gone out of their way to help others in time of need and share them with your kids.

Perform random acts of kindness. From the simple act of holding a door for someone to participating in food or clothing drives to sending a note or calling someone just to see how she is doing, show your kids that small acts can make a big difference, that they can become change agents one step at a time.



Methodology

In addition to surveying *Highlights* readers on our Web site (HighlightsKids.com), we engaged C+R Research, a leading market-research firm with expertise in youth and families, to ensure that our sampling would be representative of the broader U.S. population of children.

C+R analyzed the demographic data from the Highlights survey and then tapped into their kids' panel to provide us with a sample that would be balanced across genders and age groups. They also provided analysis of all data collected.

The survey was fielded in April and May of 2017. A total of 2,000 surveys were completed by boys and girls ages six to twelve, of which 50 percent were boys and 50 percent were girls. Thirty-eight percent of respondents were children ages six to eight; 31 percent were ages nine to ten, and 31 percent were ages eleven to twelve.

About Highlights

Highlights is a beloved global media brand dedicated to helping children become curious, creative, caring, and confident through engaging content and experiences that are focused on nurturing and developing the whole child. Through stories, poems, puzzles, jokes/riddles, science experiments, art activities, and more, kids are encouraged to think, problem solve, and build their literacy skills, all while having fun. Highlights reaches children 0-12 with its popular magazines (*Highlights Hello™*, *Highlights High Five™*, *Highlights High Five Bilingüe™*, and *Highlights™*), digital apps, toys/games, and books incorporating classic favorites like Hidden Pictures® puzzles, Goofus and Gallant®, Dear Highlights letters, and more.

C+R Research

C+R Research is a full-service marketing-insights agency that brings more than 30 years of experience in the youth segment, with two syndicated youth lifestyle reports (YouthBeat and YouthBeat Jr.) and a COPPA-compliant online panel of over 25,000 U.S. kids under the age of 13. Within the youth and family space, C+R specializes in delivering custom quantitative and qualitative research to help youth-targeted companies better understand the needs and motivations of kids and parents.

Special thanks to the kids who took the time to answer our survey about their lives.

DISCLAIMER: Due to the structure of some of the questions, all answers may not add up to 100%.



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