

Mother Nurture

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Giving Is the Most Natural Thing in the World

I try to get our son, age 4, to share his toys, etc. with his younger sister or the kids at school, but everything is always, "No! Mine!" with him. I feel like I am swimming upstream, pushing against his nature. Then I think about the world and sometimes I wonder, are people just plain selfish?

You're right, some days you read the newspaper and have to shake your head in dismay and sorrow.

Your question is poignant, touching, and profound: Are humans naturally more inclined to be domineering and selfish, or to be cooperative and giving?

Your Theory of Human Nature

How we answer this question leads right to how we raise our children (and conduct ourselves with others, write laws, establish governments, and so on). If our answer leans toward the domineering view, then it follows that people – including children – need substantial controls (both external and internalized) to get them to act right. On the other hand, if the answer leans toward the cooperative view, then most people should be able to do alright with a lot of freedom to find their own way toward civilized behavior.

What's your own personal opinion about all this?

Of course, people are different. Some are very aggressive and exploitive of others, while some are very peaceful and generous. And wherever he or she is along that spectrum, almost everyone has the capacity to be both selfishly grabby and selflessly open-handed – just like preschoolers!

Further, much research about parenting keeps painting the same picture: the best-odds strategy for most children is to raise them with:

- HIGH love, nurturance, acceptance, attunement, sensitivity, responsiveness, affection, interest
- HIGH communication of moral values and support for being resilient, resourceful, diligent, ambitious
- MODERATE parental authority, including an insistence that parents are the ultimate boss, clear standards, and potent rewards and penalties

In short, we firmly believe that parents must claim their authority, be morally self-confident, and take responsibility for the moral instruction of their children.

That said, we also believe that the great weight of evidence is on the side of the view that the tendencies to be cooperative and giving are much more central and

stronger in most people than tendencies to be domineering and selfish. And to anyone who worries and cares about the world we are bequeathing to our children, this has got to be good news.

The Vast Territory of Generosity and Giving

Consider how much of human life is spent in generosity and in giving (the former is a quality of being while the latter is an activity we do). You are generous and giving whenever you *be* or *do* in the territory these words point to:

- Serve
- Contribute
- Donate, grant, award, bestow, make a gift of, bequeath
- Praise, acknowledge
- Love, care, like
- Sacrifice, relinquish
- Devote, dedicate
- Be altruistic
- Forgive
- Forbear, restrain yourself for the sake of others

How about some concrete examples? You give whenever you:

- Pat an arm in friendship, sympathy, or encouragement
- Put money – or a banana or chocolate – in the donation bowl
- Relax your position and open up to the viewpoint of another person
- Offer anything out upon the internet or in a newsletter, etc.
- Try to help someone
- Wave someone ahead of you in line
- Try to cheer someone up
- Make a gift
- Write a thank you note
- Love
- Listen patiently when you'd rather be doing something else
- Cultivate qualities in yourself that will benefit others
- Change a diaper – at either end of the lifespan
- Give some money to a homeless person
- Express gratitude or appreciation
- Vote
- Volunteer your time
- Tell somebody about something great

In particular, you are generous whenever you “give no man or woman cause to fear you” – in other words, when you live in a virtuous, moral way. The common ground of the major ethical or religious traditions of mankind contains five fundamental guidelines: Do not kill, steal, lie, intoxicate yourself to heedlessness, or cause harm through sexuality. Simply living morally is a kind of giving.

Born and Bred to Be Generous

When you consider all this, it's clear that we spend a lot of time giving to others. It's the most natural thing in the world. Most giving is small, in passing, hardly noticed, the breath and wallpaper of life. It's not hard to overlook. And with all the attention paid in the media to images and words of destruction and horrible mistreatment, it is easy to conclude that the true home of humanity is on the dark side of the force.

Yet, while it is certainly true that we are animals atop the food chain and capable of great aggressiveness, it is even more true that we are genetically programmed to be cooperative and generous. The defining feature of human society is cooperation. Notwithstanding the daily weird killing on the 6 o'clock news, harmful aggression is the exception, not the rule: that's why it's news.

Consider these facts about human beings:

- We evolved from a rarity in the animal kingdom: species composed of groups of individuals that routinely shared food with each other, even when they weren't related.
- Our ancestors were unusual among animals in another way as well, in that they cooperated to gather and hunt.
- A third distinctive feature of humans is that males often stay involved after children are conceived to protect and share food with them and their mother. While we might wish this were even more common, it's important to remember that in almost all animal species, fathers take zero interest in their young.
- Genetically, our nearest relative – the chimpanzee – has DNA that is about 98% similar to our own. That crucial 2% is largely directed at brain development, and the portions of the brain are especially affected have to do with language, expressing emotion and reading it in others, and planning – all at the heart of cooperative activity.
- Under stress, researchers have found that the fight-or-flight activations of the sympathetic nervous system are commonly channeled down “tend and befriend” channels for women. We haven't seen a study on this yet, but probably there are comparable “fix and huddle” channels for men (sorry about the lack of rhyming for guys . . .).
- Exotic game theory analyses have shown what's evident in hunter-gatherer cultures, at the UN, and on the playground of the local elementary school: that there is an evolutionary advantage in being a trustworthy cooperative partner, one who gives at least as much as he or she receives. In particular, studies have shown that in an intensely harsh natural environment – such as was present on the plains of Africa – groups that have members who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the group will over time come to dominate other groups that lack such altruistic and generous members.
- To quote Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D. in *Foreign Affairs*, January/February, 2006: “Across the roughly 150 or so primate species, the larger the average social group, the larger the cortex [the portion responsible for higher order reasoning, communication, and social judgment] relative to the rest of the brain

In sum, over three or four million years, the groups of hominid ancestors that developed giving, generosity, and cooperation to a fine art were the ones that survived to pass down the genes that are our endowment today. As a result, we are “born and bred” to want to give, to contribute, to make a difference.

When Generosity Is Thwarted

One way to see the centrality of that impulse in the human experience is to observe what happens when it’s thwarted:

- On the job, even well-paid workers who feel they lack ways to contribute and add value have much less job satisfaction.
- In mid-life, when the developmental task of what Erik Erikson called “generativity” (versus “stagnation”) is not fulfilled, depression and a sense of aimlessness are the result.
- In adolescence today, getting shunted off to quasi-reservations of high schools and malls – away from the world of adult work that was the natural province of teenagers throughout most human history – breeds a sense of alienation and irrelevance that in turn fosters poor motivation and a predilection for drugs and other risky behaviors. One reason so many adolescents are angry is that there’s no way for them to be *useful*.

In Conclusion

So, have faith that your son will appreciate more and more the rewards of sharing and giving, cooperation and generosity. In the beginning, the rewards will take the form mainly of enlightened self-interest in the rough-and-tumble real world of children, boiling down to: “If I scratch your back after you scratch mine, probably you’ll scratch mine again.” Over time, the rewards will naturally become more internalized, more emotional, and more abstracted, evolving into a quiet, almost unnoticed pleasure in simply being a good person. Like everyone else, deep down, in the whole wide world.

(Rick Hanson is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 16 and 19. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the principal authors of Mother Nurture: A Mother’s Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)