

Learning to Care

The holidays are all about sharing and caring, but the constant barrage of advertising can also give children a bad case of the “gimme-gimmes” – not a very caring attitude! What can families do to nurture a sense of caring in our children that lasts through the holiday season and all year long? How do we help our children develop a life-long attitude of caring and service to others in our families, our neighborhoods, our schools and our community?

In his book, The Moral Intelligence of Children, Robert Coles underscores the important idea that “values education or character education is happening all the time”. It is important that we talk about our values with our children, and explain why we believe it’s important to be caring or honest or industrious or any other value. But it is also essential that we “walk the talk”. After all, it’s what we adults do in the everyday-ness of life that gives our children a visible, tangible example of character in action. Each day, what we do, what we don’t do, what we say or don’t say, provides our children with their real-life character education. So if we want our children to grow into caring adults, we have to model how to be caring.

We know from our Assets survey that 52% of Arlington teens report that they are caring – that they place “a high value on helping others in the community”. So, as a community, we have a strong base to build on. But a closer look at the data reveals an interesting fact. When you look at the data by gender you find 59% of girls report having the caring asset, but only 43% of boys. In the “service to others” asset, 50 % of girls and only 40% of boys report that they are serving others in the community an hour each week. It seems clear that we all need to think about our expectations of boys’ behavior (“boys will be boys”) and the messages we may inadvertently send to boys about “caring” being a “girl thing”.

So what are some practical things can we do to nurture caring in our children? We could begin by:

- Helping children name their own feelings. In order to care about others, you have to understand your own feelings.
- Helping children understand that other people have feelings, just like they do. As children get older, they can begin to understand that other people’s feelings may be very *different* from their own. They can begin to understand another person’s perspective.
- Pointing out to our children the many opportunities they have to help others in their families and in their neighborhoods - like raking leaves for an elderly neighbor, preparing food for a sick friend, bringing in the groceries for Mom or Dad or helping a sibling with homework. (Practically speaking, some of this “help” may not be all that helpful, but simply helping children become more aware of situations where they can be helpful nurtures a caring attitude.)
- Being appreciative when children are helpful and caring.

- Looking for ways to volunteer as a family. (Visit the [Arlington County Volunteer Office](#) web site and then click on “Volunteer Now”)
- Modeling the behavior you’re trying to nurture. If you behave in a caring way, your children are much more apt to grow-up to be caring adults.
- Supporting opportunities for children and families to be helpful and caring at school or in your faith community.

Holidays can be a wonderful time for families with lots of opportunities to learn about caring, but they can also be very stressful for everyone. Taking the time to reflect together as a family on where you want to focus your time and energy during this busy season can help everyone have a more relaxed, enjoyable and caring holiday. Whatever you’re celebrating, I hope it’s magical. Happy New Year!