

Try Something New With Your Kids: Focus on the 3 C's

9 tips to teach your children caring, compassion and creativity this summer

Early June – the time when thousands of children around the world head out for summer break. For many parents, it is a time of concern. “What classes should I have my kid take this summer?” “How can I make sure my child doesn’t lose any of their academic skills?” “I need to keep my kids busy this summer, so I need more reading or math classes to help them prepare for the next school year.”

While I agree that summer is a great time to hone some academic skills, why not try a different approach and focus on the 3 C’s instead of the 3 R’s—Caring, Compassion, and Creativity. These skills may do more to boost academic performance in the fall than you realize.

Research in the field of positive psychology has found many connections between enhanced social-emotional learning skills (SEL) and increased academic performance. In a landmark 2011 meta-analysis, Durlak et al. found an 11% increase in academic performance following social-emotional learning interventions. In a 2017 follow-up analysis of the research related to the long-term impact of teaching SEL skills, the same team of researchers found that the positive effects of enhanced social-emotional learning skills not only continued, but even increased to 13%.

More, students who receive social-emotional interventions, or an explicit focus on building social-emotional learning skills, have decreased drug and alcohol use, decreased episodes of maladaptive behaviors and reduced periods of emotional distress, including anxiety and depression. Given the increases in the latter reported in our current generation of children, including improvements in suicidal ideation and decreases in life satisfaction⁸, the need to nurture social-emotional development seems clear to me.

This summer, instead of focusing on the 3 R's – reading, writing, and arithmetic – focus on developing the social-emotional skills of caring (empathy and kindness), compassion (both for others and for self), and creativity (including cognitive flexibility and creative problem- solving). These skills can lead to increased resilience and emotional intelligence, which leads to improved school (and life) performance in the years to follow. The following simple tips can show you how easy it is to build the 3 C's into your child's life this summer.

CARING: Teaching kids to care is all about teaching the skills of empathy and kindness. Development of these skills leads directly to improvements in resiliency and nurtures emotional intelligence. The three tips below are easy ways to begin creating a more compassionate and caring home:

- Commit to intentional happiness. This summer, why not commit to developing kindness and joy. The Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkley can help with their monthly Happiness Calendars. Commit to at least one activity a week. These are fun, easy to do, and can lead to more caring in your children and your household.
- Begin a family service project. Few things nurture empathy, compassion, and kindness more than acts of service. Take time this summer to engage in a family service project. Donate your time and talents to charitable organizations as a family. You will teach the importance of service, develop kindness skills, and potentially find a new family tradition.
- Random acts of kindness. Throughout the summer, look for ways you and your children can conduct random acts of kindness. Buy a stranger a coffee on your next trip to Starbucks. Write get-well cards to children in the hospital. Pick up litter at the beach. Any little act of kindness. Ask your children to develop a list of kindness acts they'd like to do this summer and help them make a plan to accomplish it.

COMPASSION: Compassion is centered on a mature development of empathy. As the previous C focused on caring and kindness, this really is about nurturing self-compassion skills. Self-compassion is typically defined as the ability to understand, accept, and love ourselves fully. Neff, a leading researcher in this field, explains that self-compassion involves mindfulness, self-kindness, and recognizing shared humanity⁵. Setting the time to develop each of these areas over the summer will improve self-compassion, leading to improved resilience overall.

The following 3 tips can help you nurture self-compassion in yourself and your children this summer:

- Develop a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, or the act of present-moment awareness, involves learning to have your brain and your body in the same place at the same time. Taking time each day to practice being fully aware of the present moment is often tricky at first. People have been conditioned to “multi-task” and are typically unaware of each moment. Start small. Schedule time for focused breathing, using strategies like a 4-7-8 breath or other exercises. GoZen for kids is a great place to start. Begin with a couple of minutes daily, and increase from there.
- Start a positivity journal. Teach your children how to create and use a positivity journal. Similar to gratitude exercises, a positivity journal involves writing down three things about yourself that you are proud of or grateful for. This forces the participant to look for the positive things about self and reflect on these every day.
- Develop character strengths. Strengths-based practices are self-discovery and improvement activities that focus on developing positive mindsets and compassion through recognition of one’s character strengths and the development of these strengths. Research has shown that concentrating on strengths-based practices improves well-being and decreases anxiety and depression. Start by taking the free character strength survey on the VIA Institute of Character website with your children. Take time to explore the site and try out some of their recommendations for developing various character strengths. Commit to trying a few character practices each week.

CREATIVITY: In this section, I am defining creativity as the ability to transcend traditional thinking, ideas, etc. and create new ways of thinking and doing things, innovate, and think “outside of the box.” As we develop creativity, we build our perspective-taking skills, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving—all of which enhance our emotional intelligence and resilience. Here are some fun and easy ways to develop creative thinking with your children this summer:

- Start a family game night. If you aren’t already doing family game night, start this summer. Using language-based games like Apples-to-Apples, or activity games like Pictionary and Quelf, or strategic games like Blokus, and even Uno can nurture cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, social skills, and more. Set aside a specific time and take turns picking the games. Everyone will have a blast without

ever realizing how much “learning” is actually happening.

- Schedule creativity sessions. Using the spontaneous activities from *Odyssey of the Mind* or other creativity exercises, have children learn creative problem-solving and teamwork through activities. Use these types of activities at summer parties. Your children will be entertained while they learn collaboration and creativity skills.
- Allow plenty of time for play and solitude. To keep kids engaged and out of trouble, parents and educators have devalued “play” and non-tech solitude. Kids, themselves, have gotten out of the habit of creative play and solitude that doesn’t involve passive engagement with a screen or technology. Use this summer to bring back play, solitude, and relaxation (not vegging in front of a screen, but soaking in nature and mindfulness). Kaufman, a leading researcher in the field of creativity, often cites solitude and a necessary ingredient to creative activity. As an artist and a highly creative human, I have to agree. Schedule playtime and solitude this summer. The children may balk initially, but by the end of the summer months, they may find solitude and non-screen downtime to be an essential part of their self-care.

Nurturing the 3 C’s with your children this summer can also help increase your positive family relationships, build community at home, and nurture the social environment. With all of the potential positives, it makes sense to focus in this area. Your children will have fun, your family will grow closer, and everyone will reap the educational benefits of increased social-emotional skills in the fall. Give it a try!