



Compassion is the need of the hour

THE PANDEMIC REMINDS US OF OUR DUTY TO INCULCATE THE VALUES OF EMPATHY AND COMPASSION IN EVERY CHILD SO THAT THEY LEARN TO BECOME INDIVIDUALS WHO NOT ONLY DISPLAY SENSITIVITY TOWARDS THE SITUATION OF OTHERS BUT ALSO SUPPORT THEM IN TIMES OF NEED. **ANANNYA CHAKRABORTY** REPORTS.

The highly contagious COVID-19 virus has turned the world upside down. But amidst the despair and gloom, we have witnessed stories of hope, resilience, and empathy. Individuals and communities have responded bravely to the situation and helped others deal with the agony caused by the pandemic. While healthcare workers have been working relentlessly to save the lives of those infected with COVID-19, community and family support has helped individuals navigate an array of emotions caused by the economic turmoil and health concerns.

The pandemic reminds us of our duty to inculcate the values of empathy and compassion in every child so that they learn to become individuals who not only display sensitivity towards the situation of others but also support them in times of need. This is even more relevant for a culturally and socially diverse country like India. While empathy is the ability to understand another's problems, compassion makes individuals act and help others in need.

How can we ensure that our children develop these skills? A study by Holm and Tsai in 2017 shows that the conception,

experience, and expression of compassion vary with cultures. Some of the ways we can cultivate compassion among students are highlighted below.

Sending messages of appreciation

Students should be encouraged to thank and pay tributes to individuals who support them. This could be school or domestic help staff, delivery personnel, health care workers, and anyone within their social network or the community who have helped them. There are reports from across countries about how children have thanked healthcare workers who have been tirelessly

working to treat patients during this pandemic. In India, *The Bangalore Mirror* reported on 01 July that students and staff from an International school connected virtually to thank doctors and health care providers on Indian Doctor's Day. Social media has also seen a growth of appreciation messages for frontline workers – police, fire fighters, ambulance drivers, and health care staff. The challenge however is to build a culture where children acquire the skills to display compassion and care from an early age.

Sharing stories of compassion

Students should read and know more about acts of compassion. *The Mumbai Mirror* recently reported that a policeman borrowed a car from his friend to start an ambulance service, while *Forbes* covered the story of a 24-year-old Uber driver who has been helping ailing patients commute to hospitals. These stories of kindness, empathy, and compassion should be discussed with children. We have to highlight such incidents and examples so that children are aware of the exceptional contributions of individuals to the community. Such conversations with children about warriors who place the community before themselves cannot be sporadic, they need to be ongoing and sustained. Our primary and secondary socialisation (school being one major socialisation site) processes should award empathy a higher value.

Joining voluntary and community work

Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW) and work education are subjects that cover community and social work in schools. But how much weightage and importance do we give these subjects? Are they as important as other subjects taught within the school curriculum? We need to observe regular social work and community service days in schools, and celebrate the achievements of students in those activities as much as the marks and grades of other so-called 'core' subjects. We should also provide scholarships or bursaries to students who

make an exceptional contribution to society. By working for the elderly, poor and vulnerable communities, students are more likely to develop compassion and a sense of civic-mindedness that prepares them to help others. These activities can be organised by partnering with local NGOs and community service providers to deliver structured programmes.

We need active conversations and interventions to change mindsets – the earlier, the better. However, activities in the school alone might not be enough; collaboration with parents is equally necessary. We should regularly report to parents the progress of their wards in areas of soft skills .

Every small act of kindness matters, whether it is chatting with the elderly for 30 minutes every week to help them cope with loneliness, or helping them water their house plants . Compassionate leadership is a highly desirable skill in 21st century workplaces and we need to instil a sense of compassion in the young from the very beginning. The situation we are facing at the moment emphasises the power of compassion in our lives and the importance of nurturing compassion among our future citizens. By doing so, schools will undoubtedly play a key role in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. **T**

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