

Faith



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis Raising a strong, kind child

I remember the incident clearly, doing cheer stunts in my family’s front yard with a baby sitter from my brother’s grade.

I was 9 years old, shy and overweight. The baby sitter had already stunted with my sisters, and she insisted that I try, too. I didn’t want to, but after more prodding, I finally relented.

What happened next was devastating.

“Ugh,” she said, trying unsuccessfully to lift me from under the armpits as I stood on her thighs, “she’s heavier than Margaret, the top of our pyramid.”

I had worried this might happen — and that is why I’d hesitated. But what pained me more than having this fear manifest was the careless remark my baby sitter made.

You see, my brother is 7 years older than me. And at the tender age of 9, I was savvy enough to do the math and let this comparison to a 16-year-old girl do a number on my self-esteem and the body image I’d have for many years to come.

My baby sitter wasn’t trying to be mean. To be honest, I think she was clueless, voicing a thought in her head that was better left unsaid.

And while this encounter left a deep impression on me, I doubt she’d even recall it. I consider this a prime example of how easy it is to hurt someone without realizing the damage you’ve done.

As a mom and a writer, I often hear stories about the hurtful encounters today’s kids face. While some hurts are inadvertent, like my story, others are intentional. Sadly, the world shaping our kids is even tougher and more critical than the world that shaped us. Even at young ages,

kids can make flippant remarks and insensitive statements that cut straight to the core.

In our current parenting culture, one popular mentality is to “fix” every offender. To take an extreme outward focus and control our kids’ environment so they never get hurt. While external action is frequently needed — especially as it relates to creating a kinder culture and putting a fast stop to bullying — it won’t solve the problem.

The truth is, we can’t “fix” anyone or protect our kids from every slight. Even when we think our kid is safe, as I was with my baby sitter, there is still the emotional risk of them being deeply wounded.

This is why I believe in taking internal action as well — teaching our kids to be strong. Empowering them to handle hurtful, rude or mean people. Equipping them to process painful situations and difficult emotions. Cultivating an inner strength that protects their heart and enables a healthy response. Instilling in them a crucial life skill they’ll need their entire life.

Unfortunately, our kids will never reach a point in life where they stop feeling hurt. Like us, they are flawed, imperfect people surrounded by flawed, imperfect people. They have fragile psyches and personal weaknesses that sometimes make them hurt others just as others hurt them.

Once our kids realize how we all can be guilty of inflicting pain (intentionally or not) and how we all have room to improve, they can turn hurtful encounters into teachable moments. They can remember how “Pain instructs” and let their pain help them become a stronger,

kinder person.

It is a helpless feeling for parents to see your child upset. You want to reverse the damage, erase the memory from their memory bank, yet it can’t be undone. Whether it’s a classmate who insulted them, a Little League coach who yelled at them, a friend who turned on them or a peer who spread a rumor, I think the first step is to comfort your child and remind them how deeply loved they are.

Then, when they’re in a better place and open to a takeaway, you can empower them with words that infuse strength, kindness and hope. Advice that sounds like this:

Everyone in your life serves a purpose. Everyone has something to teach you.

While people who are kind and loving help teach you who you do want to be, those who are not kind and loving teach you who you don’t want to be.

So when you encounter someone who hurts your feelings, lean into that feeling. Ask yourself what they did to make you feel that way. Was it the words they chose? Their tone? The way they picked favorites and then ignored everyone else? The way they teased you in public just to get a laugh?

Whatever they did, make a pledge. Promise yourself that you’ll never treat anyone the way they treated you. This is how you become a kinder and more compassionate person. This is how you learn from their mistakes.

And when you meet someone you really like, lean into that feeling, too. Ask yourself what they did to make you feel so good. Then make a pledge to yourself to be more like them. This is

also how you become a kinder and more compassionate person.

Regardless of how anyone treats you, you stand to benefit. And it’s the people who teach you who you don’t want to be that provide some of the most lasting and memorable lessons on social graces, human dignity and the importance of acting with integrity.

Teaching your child to repurpose their pain empowers them with a sense of control. When someone is hurtful, they can feel it first and then categorize it as a reminder to never make anyone feel that way. This builds kindness and strength. This helps a child learn to stand on their feet and bounce back from negative encounters.

Certainly, children need good role models, people they admire and hope to be more like. At the same time, nobody is a waste. Everyone has something to teach. The worst people offer the best examples of how not to act, and it’s through this filter that children can find freedom, relief and the greatest power of all — the power to change themselves through the most unlikely motivation.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a Mountain Brook mom of four girls, columnist and blogger for The Huffington Post. Her two books for teen and tween girls – “Liked: Whose Approval Are You Living For? And 10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know” – are available on Amazon and everywhere books are sold. Join her Facebook community at “Kari Kampakis, Writer,” visit her blog at karikampakis.com or contact her at kari@karikampakis.com.



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