

Teachable Moments

By Sarah Brenkert, Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus

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Just a few days ago, squinting into the morning sun on a gorgeous April Day, I watched as we cut the ribbon on a new art exhibit, *Opening Doors* – and felt both enormously proud and profoundly humbled.

The exhibit, a series of real doors transformed by local artists, forms a welcome ribbon at our entrance. Our hope is that these vibrant doors will inspire and delight through their beauty, color, texture and design, and offer up the message that *“all are welcome here!”*

I felt proud, because I am honored to work at a Museum that so genuinely values inclusion, diversity and equality. And I was humbled, because the challenges facing families in our community are great, and stress, scarcity, oppression, systemic discrimination, and personal struggle are realities for many of our neighbors, friends, co-workers and classmates.

With my own kids, I wrestle daily with the privilege we enjoy, and the need to help William and Vivi understand how unearned advantage and disadvantage work. As Sabrina Joy Stevens (a brilliant, self-identified writer, advocate and sometimes troublemaker) puts it, this is critical in order to help my kids *“meaningfully and ethically connect with other people in our diverse society.”*

I think most parents wonder how to instill empathy, kindness and a sense of social responsibility in their children. But it can be hard to find ways for young children to contribute, and challenging to talk with our little ones about the social issues our service might address.

But volunteering as a family can be a powerful way to connect to your community, and to one another. As Jenny Friedman, founder and executive director of the non-profit Doing Good Together, writes:

Each time we come together as a family to practice kindness or serve others, we have an opportunity to teach our children that every human being has worth, that we are stewards of this planet, and that the world is a better place when we care for others and they care for us.

Where to Start

Trust me – no one wants my nine- and six-year-old anywhere near a pneumatic nail gun on a Habitat for Humanity build. That would be, as Shel Silverstein memorably put it, *“the kind of help we all can do without.”* And it can be tough to find meaningful, developmentally appropriate service opportunities for young children. Often times, support agencies and charitable organizations benefit most from truly skilled labor (like IT services or grant-writing support) or direct contributions of cash. But the Denver-based Metro Volunteers has developed a truly brilliant compendium of service opportunities and ideas, many of them appropriate for preschoolers, in its Family Volunteering Toolkit:

www.metrovolunteers.org/volunteerresources.

This easy-to-navigate Toolkit is organized by service type (“helping the earth” or “helping animals”) and offers family-friendly service project ideas along with the names and contact information for local organizations and agencies that may be able to accept your donation. There is also a terrific list of organizations that are willing to accept in-person volunteers as young as five or six (with adult support).

How to Talk About It

If it’s challenging to find service opportunities for young children, it’s often equally difficult to find ways to talk with our little ones about big issues like homelessness or food scarcity. We want to help our kids understand their world – but without creating fear or offering explanations that are too complex.

Nancy Owen, MA, a family therapist in Seattle, suggests a few guideposts to help us navigate this complicated road. She suggests that, especially with children under age seven or eight, the best discussions are simple and to the point. Based on Owen’s guideposts, here are some suggestions to address social issues with little ones:

- **Follow your child’s lead.** If you encounter a person who appears homeless, or who is asking for assistance at a traffic stop, your child may have questions, and this is a good opportunity to receive those questions with openness. Gently probe to get a sense of what your child is really asking – they may be concerned the person is lost, or cold, or wonder how they care for their pet. Try to understand what your child is really asking.
- **Provide a simple explanation to their question.** For example, you might explain that being homeless means that one does not have a place to call home. It might be for a day or two or for many weeks or months.
- **Encourage compassion, empathy, and respect.** All humans deserve our kind regard, simply because they are human. Avoid making judgmental comments or put-downs. Treat homeless people with dignity and respect. Look people in the eye and smile. Given the enormous amount of stigma that people facing homelessness experience, it can be powerful to let kids know that people experiencing homelessness or hunger are just like us - but things have happened in their life that have brought them to this point. Acknowledge that everyone needs resources and support.
- **Assure your child that there are options for people experiencing challenges.** Young children may have feelings of sadness or worry. Reassure them that there are organizations and community supports that can help, and reassure them of their own safety and security.

High-quality picture books are also a wonderful starting place for talking about difficult issues with children. You can read them for the story without worrying too much about making it didactic, but you can expand on questions or wonderings the stories may bring up with your kids. Here are three that have opened doors for conversations about diverse experiences, advantage and disadvantage in my family recently:

A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams

The story of Rosa, her mother and grandmother saving their coins to buy a comfortable chair after their home is destroyed in a fire shows a strong, capable family working through hardship to rebuild.

La Mariposa by Francisco Jimenez

Spanish-speaking Francisco attends a school where only English is allowed to be spoken. The book has several elements to prompt conversations about empathy, kindness and respect for others’ gifts and experiences.

Last Stop On Market Street by Matt de la Peña

CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town, and encounter all kinds of people. CJ's questions are answered with strength and conviction by his grandma, and the diversity of the city and people around them can be a jumping off point for kids and parents to talk about disability, poverty, social injustice, and service to others.

Whether you start by talking about a tough issue, welcoming your child's questions, or begin by taking action, the conversations you have and service you offer strengthen your community – and send the empowering message to kids that they're important enough to have an impact on someone or something else. What a gift.

All my best,

Sarah