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SPEAKEASY | COMMENTARY

How Books Can Teach Your Child to Care

By **ANNA DEWDNEY**

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First Lady Michelle Obama watches as her daughters Malia (center) and Sasha read 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?' to children during the annual White House Easter Egg Roll in Washington on April 1, 2013.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The child who is unable to relate to others, who does not appreciate that other children have feelings that matter, often ends up isolated or worse.

Long before I was the creator of a successful picture-book series, I was a teacher, and before that, I was a daycare provider. And I am a parent. I've spent quite a bit of time with children, and I have come to believe that the one key element to a successful, functional child in a classroom or social setting is the ability of that child to understand other children and adults – in other words, *empathy*.

I worked with children who were terribly unkind to each other for a variety of reasons, but it was always the children who were unable to empathize that were the most challenging. A child who is acting out due to anger or fear, but who ultimately recognizes that other individuals have feelings, can be readily helped; that child can learn to balance his emotional needs with those of others'. However, a child who hurts another because he doesn't see others as important individuals with feelings is a child who can't be easily reached; how can you convince that child that the world outside himself matters? As a teacher, first of small children and later of middle-schoolers, I found these children incredibly challenging to work with. I often caught myself experiencing a deep frustration and a sense of helplessness, as well sadness at how isolated these children often were. A child who coldly treats another child as a lesser being creates reverberations of pain throughout the community, and when I taught, I often felt desperate and hopeless when confronted with that moment.

A very similar sensation rises in my chest when I hear stories about group violence against an individual in which crowds gather and watch the incident... and no one calls for help. Or when I read the nasty comments that anonymous people make on the internet. Or when I see someone cut the grocery line in front of an older person. Or when I see children (or adults, or politicians) disparage other people simply because they are different, adding social momentum to the concept that it's okay to demonize others. Human beings are clannish, it's true, but there is also something that happens when we distance ourselves from those we chose to see as "other" – they become "not us," and therefore, they are seemingly not worth treating as human beings.

As parents, educators, and adults, it is up to us to teach children how to function on the planet, how to learn to be one of many instead of an island of one or a few. This past spring, Paul Bloom wrote an article ("The Baby in the Well", 5/20/13) in The New Yorker in which he made the case against empathy. He argued that while empathy is sometimes a useful feature in a human being, it is "parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate" and that "We're often at our best when we're smart enough not to rely on it." He cited several incidents in which outpourings of support for victims of disasters are misplaced, while other, needier victims are ignored because their plight never makes the national news. I think Mr. Bloom misses the point: Empathy *is* critical to our functioning as a society, but media drama and bleeding hearts do not have much to do with empathy.

Empathy is an understanding that other people have feelings, and that those feelings count. It's a fairly basic skill, but when it isn't fully developed, we end

up with problems. We've all been there. We've seen people treated unkindly for no reason other than they got in the way. Most of us have done it ourselves: snapped at strangers because we've been having a bad day, dissed a colleague because we're feeling inadequate, yelled at our children because we're worried about the mortgage. It's human nature. But most of us generally also realize that other people are sometimes adversely affected by our actions, and we make efforts to do our best to live on the planet as part of a team because we are empathetic adults.

Empathy is what keeps us from hurting each other on the playground, from cutting each other off on the highway, and from committing acts of terror and horror on other human beings. Empathy is the ability to identify our own feelings, as well as those of other beings. When we understand what makes us function, we can understand other people. And when we have internalized the notion that no matter how badly we feel, someone else may be feeling badly too, then we are able to step back and care for others. That is what living in a society is all about.

So, where do children's books fit into all this? Much tearing of hair and rending of clothing has gone on in recent years about the demise (or not) of the picture book, and we all know how critical books are to the development of reading in a child. A good book and the joy it provides is often the reason a child is motivated to become a reader in the first place. Language is fun, imagination is fun, and when a child experiences the joy of reading with a childcare provider or teacher, he or she is encouraged to take that next step and become a reader. And, we all know that readers thrive, while those with poorer literacy skills fall behind in this world of the written word.

However, empathy is as important as literacy. When we read with a child, we are doing so much more than teaching him to read or instilling in her a love of language. We are doing something that I believe is just as powerful, and it is something that we are losing as a culture: *by reading with a child, we are teaching that child to be human.* When we open a book, and share our voice and imagination with a child, that child learns to see the world through someone else's eyes. I will go further and say that that child then learns to feel the world more deeply, becoming more aware of himself and others in a way that he simply cannot experience except in our laps, or in our classrooms, or in our reading circles.

We learn empathy as children, through our interactions with the people in our lives and by experiencing the world around us. When we read books with children, we share other worlds, and even more importantly, we share ourselves. Reading with children makes an intimate, human connection that teaches that child what it means to be alive as one of many beings on the planet. We are naming feelings, sharing experience, and expressing love and understanding, all in a safe environment. When we read a book with children, then children – no matter how stressed, no matter how challenged – are drawn out of themselves to bond with other human beings, and to see and *feel* the experiences of others. I believe that it is this moment that makes us human. In this sense, *reading* makes us human.

Instilling empathy in our children is a huge job. Teachers and caregivers can't do all of it (although the burden seems to be increasingly resting on their shoulders). Parents have to do it, too. Society as a whole ought to do it, but society is made up of individuals, so it's up to you and me to teach children to be humane.

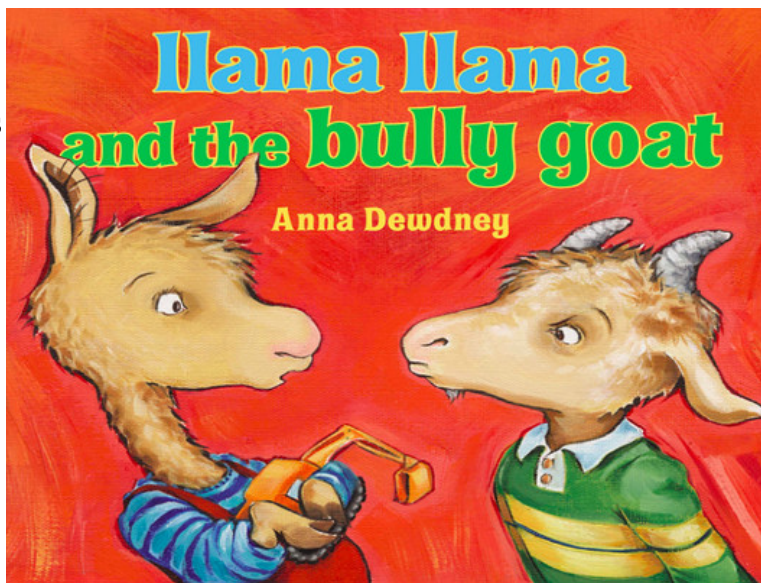
A child with a strong emotional center doesn't hurt himself or other children. It is the child who doesn't develop empathy who lashes out without remorse. A child without empathy runs the risk of growing into an adult who is lacking in humanity and does things that fray the human fabric of society. *So how do we do it?* How do we nurture and teach empathy in children? Here's one really good way to go about it:

Sit down, put a child on your lap, and read a story. Have fun. Read in character and use funny voices. Ask questions about the plot and the characters. Talk about how the story makes you feel, and ask your child if she can relate to what the characters are experiencing. Laugh and cry. Be human, loving, and strong, and that will allow the children in your care to be human, loving, and strong. Perhaps, the next time those children feel like hitting or pinching someone, they'll hold off and ask for a hug from you instead.

Anna Dewdney is the author and illustrator of "Llama Llama and the Bully Goat," along with six other books in the "Llama Llama" book series for young readers. She taught at a boys' boarding school for many years before becoming a full-time author. She is also a full-time mom to two daughters.

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