

# Creating Just and Caring Communities

*Created by the Bullying Prevention Initiative at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*

## *A Road-Map for Parents*

*Here are some concrete things that parents can do to create just and caring communities that promote respect, responsibility, and readiness.*

### **Make Caring for Others a Primary Goal of Child-Raising**

Research suggests that modern American parents are often significantly more focused on their children's self-esteem and happiness than on their concern for others. The intense focus on happiness, as opposed to respect and responsibility for others, appears to be unprecedented in our history.

As parents, we can shift the focus back to caring for others in many ways. As a start, instead of telling children, "The most important thing is that you are happy," we can tell them, "The most important thing is that you are kind, and that you are responsible for others."

More importantly, we can avoid subtly prioritizing our children's happiness day to day over their responsibility for others. That means, for example, not letting our children simply write off friends they find annoying or fail to return phone calls from friends. It means encouraging our children to give other children credit for their achievements, requiring children to be respectful of others even when they're preoccupied, and letting our children know when they're not listening to others or dominating the airwaves in conversations. We can also be mindful of whether we are practicing what we are preaching in our interactions with our own friends.

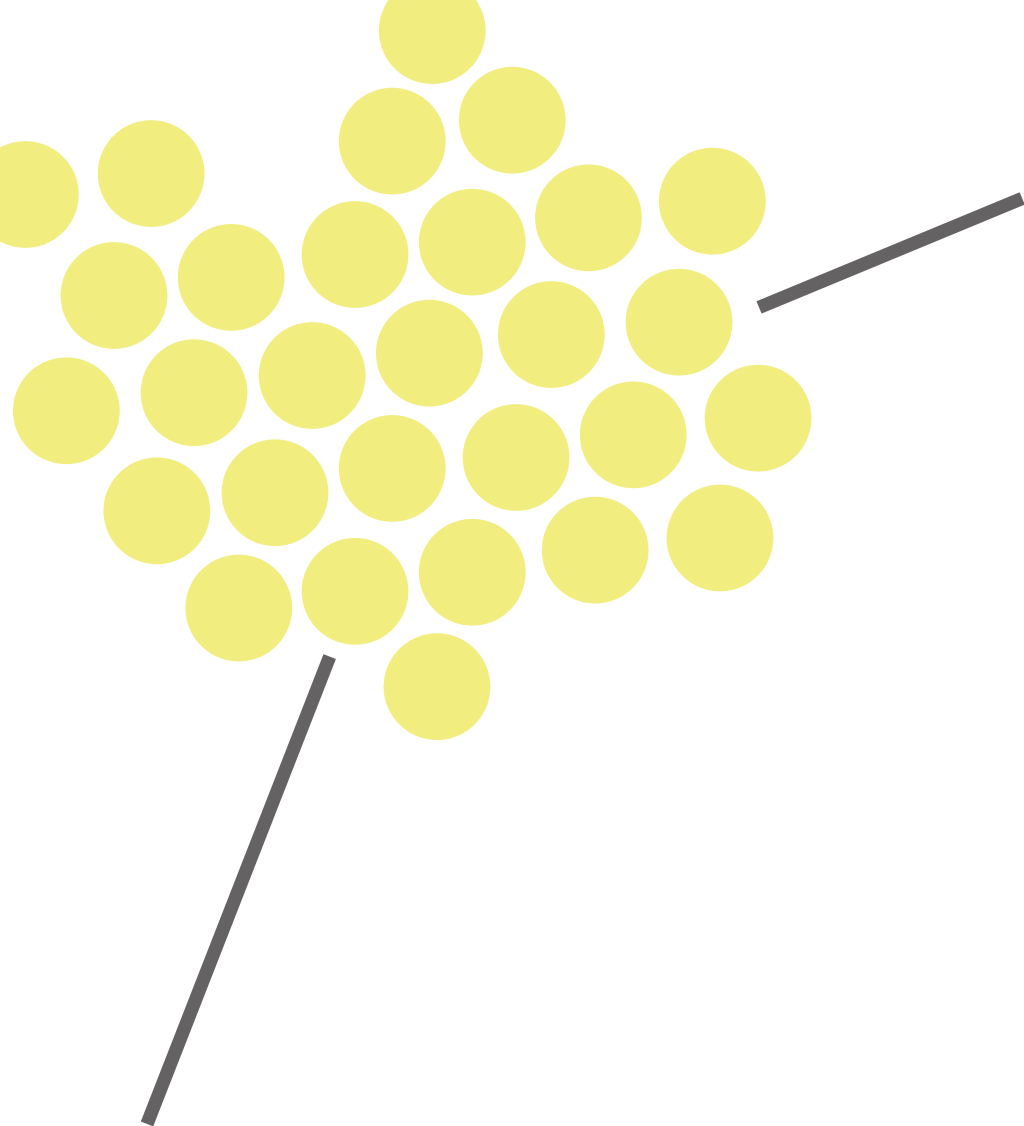
### **Make Caring and Taking Responsibility for Others Routine Parts of Life**

Too often, as parents we reward our child for every act of helpfulness, such as clearing the dinner table or helping out with a younger sibling. But children develop caring habits and dispositions when caring is woven into everyday life. It is important as parents that we expect our child to help around the house and to be helpful to siblings and neighbors and only reward uncommon acts of kindness and helpfulness.

Too often we fail to remind children that they have responsibilities to groups larger than themselves. We let them quit the soccer team or a dance group because they're not having fun, for example, without asking them to consider their responsibilities to the group. How many of us tell our children that their classrooms, their schools and their neighborhoods are communities to which they have obligations? As parents, we can routinely talk with our children about their responsibility to these communities. We can also offer our children opportunities to give back to others—through community service or youth activism—in ways that help them develop a sense of agency around their contributions to groups larger than themselves.

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## **Widen our Children's Circle of Concern and Promote Moral Awareness**

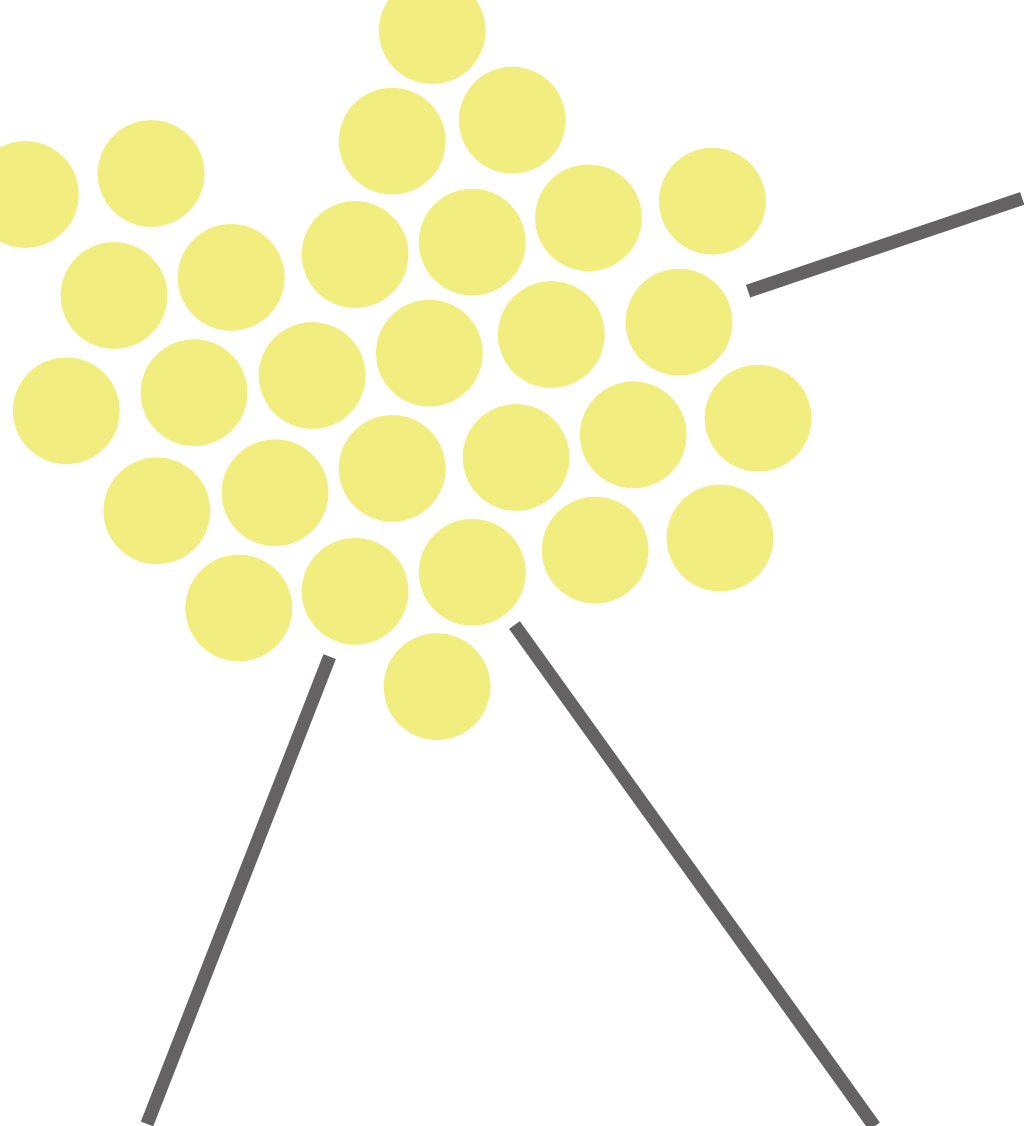
Developing a caring community is not just about caring for our friends. It's about being mindful of everyone in the community. We can help our children appreciate people who may not be on their radar, whether a bus driver or a custodian, and we can insist that our children reach out to a new kid on the playground or in the classroom. Rather than being narrowly focused on how our own children are feeling moment to moment on a playground, we can spend some time tuning in to how other children are feeling and encouraging our children to reflect on other children's experiences. When our children meet someone who is different in terms of culture, religion, economic background or other characteristics, we can ask our children to consider how these children's perspective might differ from their own.

At the same time, we can help our children register kindness and unkindness and justice and injustice in the world around them. We should point out to our child when someone is treated unfairly and ask them how that person should have been treated. Issues of justice and injustice are all around us—including in the media—and we can use these moments as opportunities to talk to our children about their views and to share our own.

## **Think Carefully about Whether We are Modeling Responsibility for Others and the Community**

Almost all parents think they're good role models for their kids. But often as parents we are very focused on our own children, and we don't model concern for other people's children. Many parents, for example, want children with behavior problems or special needs removed from a classroom because those children are interfering with their children's learning. Our children are not likely to develop respect and concern for others who are struggling if we don't model this concern.

Parenting may be the most important and hardest thing we do, yet often parents feel isolated as they struggle to make complex decisions about how to parent, and all parents have blind spots. As a community, we can support each other; we can have the courage to invite people we are close to and respect to give us feedback about our parenting. We can work to support parents who are stressed and struggling.



## **Don't Assume Teenagers are Selfish and Egocentric: Assume the Best.**

A good deal of literature now suggests that teens are inevitably selfish and egocentric and are a kind of separate species (a popular book on teens is called *A Tribe Apart*). Some media reports of the scientific literature even suggest that teens are selfish because their brains are wired differently. Because of these widely held notions, many parents let teens off the hook when they act selfishly or don't hold teens to high moral standards.

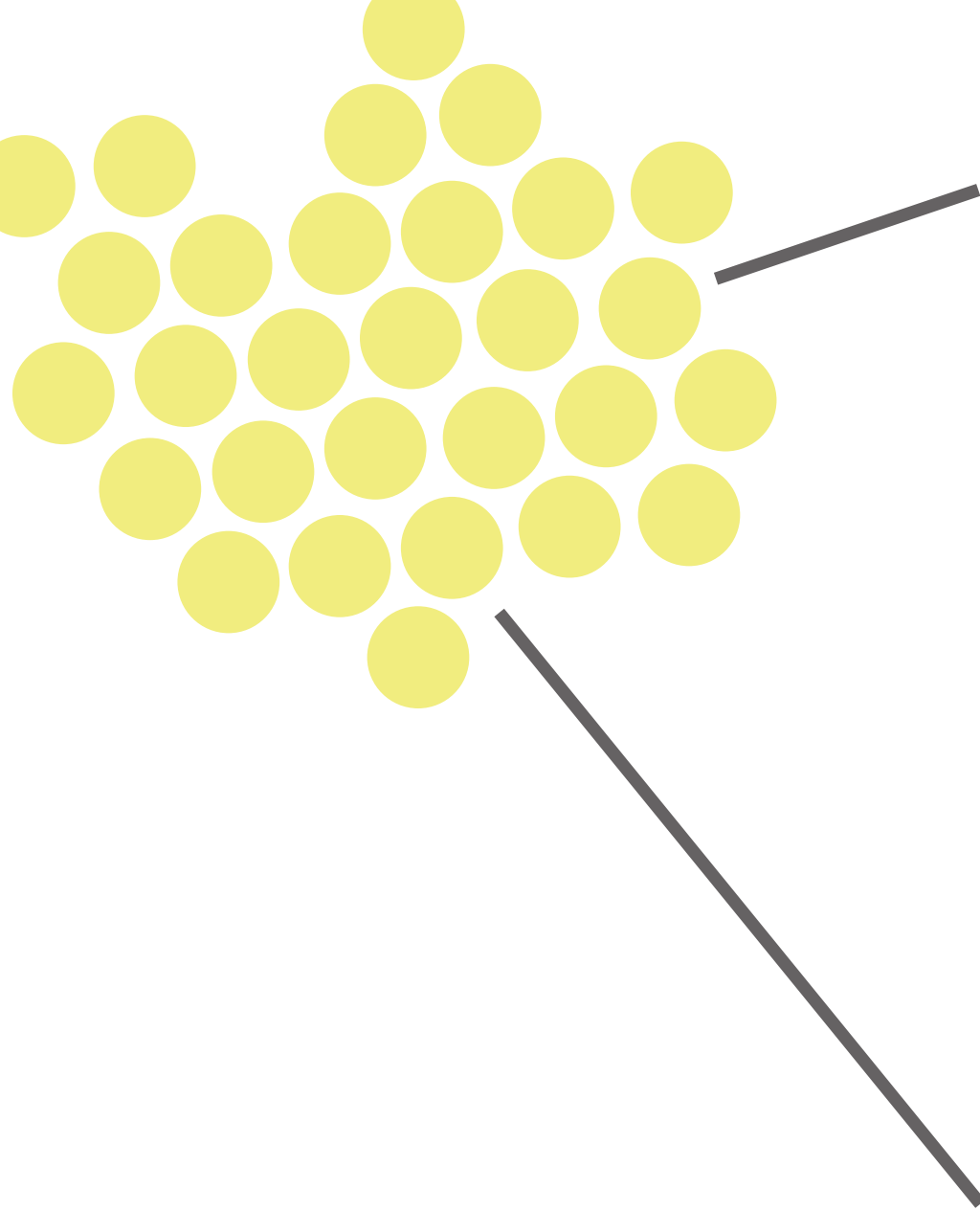
In fact, though teenagers are engaged in a deep process of identify formation and self-exploration, they are also quite conscious of and interested in the feelings of others. Teenagers are developing a stronger conscience and greater abilities to take other perspectives. By showing that we believe in their ability to be empathic and respectful—and by holding them to high standards of moral responsibility—we can support our children to draw on their capacity to care about their friends and communities.

## **Expect Our Children to Appreciate Us**

That doesn't mean making ourselves the focus. It means not allowing our children to treat us as a doormat, expecting them to express some modicum of interest about major events in our lives, and to thank us for our generosity. After all, their relationship with us will be the primary model for their other relationships.

## **Don't Make High Achievement the Goal of Life**

Too much achievement pressure can diminish children's sense of self, make them less able to care for others, and make them more likely to experience others primarily as competitors and threats. Make achievement one theme in the large composition of life while elevating caring and concern for others as a vital goal.



**Each of us can make a difference, but together we can make a bigger difference.**

**Just and Caring communities do more than prevent bullying.**

**They promote academic and social-emotional success and moral children.**

For more information on:

**- How to evaluate school climate, student outcomes, and program outcomes:**

<http://casel.org/in-schools/assessment/>; <http://prevnet.ca>; <http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133>

**- How to select and implement evidence-based social-emotional and bullying prevention programs and curricula:**

<http://casel.org/in-schools/selecting-programs/>

**- How to create positive school climate:**

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/>

**- How to build strong relationships with families:**

<http://casel.org/publications/school-family-partnership-strategies-to-enhance-childrens-social-emotional-and-academic-growth/>

**- How to promote and sustain positive relationships:**

<http://prevnet.ca/>

**- How to support LGBT youth or students with learning differences:**

<http://www.glsen.org>; <http://www.pacer.org/bullying>

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