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Why it is important to foster humility in children, Yearbook Article 2019

Is there room for humility in an age of self-promotion? An educator explains why parents should aim to cultivate it in their children.

In the age of the hubris, the positive quality of humility has taken a backseat. Humility is seen as a sign of weakness today, in a world, which celebrates the flamboyant display of power and self-aggrandisement. It is rare to see great talent coupled with humility. And, there are very few successful corporate honchos or political leaders, who manage to find that sweet spot between hubris and humility -- to balance self-belief with a low ego. Reflecting on the importance of humility, former US President Barack Obama once said, "Let me suggest that those of us with the most power and influence need to be the most humble." He went on to add that after four years in the White House, he found, to his surprise, that he had become more "humble" since the job had made him aware of his imperfections.

Of all the human character traits we possess, humility is probably the hardest to describe, demonstrate or teach. We can, however, start by exploring the meaning of humility and what it is not. Humility is not meekness, a lack of assertiveness or diffidence. Neither is it an absence of arrogance or overconfidence. It is humble behaviour that is a reflection of a state of mind that is self-assured and self-effacing. It enables a person to exude calm confidence with no desire to self-promote despite being highly accomplished, skilled or talented. Humility comes from a place of self-confidence and high self-esteem.

If this is how humility can be described, where does this "behaviour" fit into a social media age driven by self-promotion? Since social media by design, requires youngsters to package and project images of themselves, you have people posting many carefully curated images of their fun-filled, successful lives -- vacationing at exotic destinations, partying hard with numerous friends, or receiving awards.

In fact, teens go to the extent of organising special photo-op sessions for their social media posts. They routinely use Photoshop to enhance their appearance in Facebook and Instagram pictures. These images present a glossed over view of their lives, but rarely reveal the moments of disappointment, grief, failure, or even the struggles involved in achieving their goals. Given the focus on self-promotion, teens who adopt a more humble and grounded tone online may be dismissed as 'not cool' or just plain 'boring''

Child counsellors are increasingly seeing the psychological impact on children, when they get unfriended, or when their posts don't get too many likes. The age group that suffers the most from such issues are teens who rely hugely on peer approval. What begins as harmless posting of selfies can become compulsive self-promotion.

Society and parents as a group are placing a greater emphasis on individuality as opposed to humility. There is a lot of importance given to praising and rewarding a child for their accomplishments. A child who is habituated to praise expects it for minimal effort, often resulting in a growing sense of entitlement. When they grow up and enter a professional setting as young adults, they are likely to harbour unrealistic expectations. In a nutshell, the result of over-praise ends up giving the child an inflated sense of self and a greater sense of ability than is actually the case.

There is another reason the younger generation are not in touch with humility. Indian society has transited from largely being a collectivist one, with joint families being the norm, to a nuclear family structure. Sharing, caring, respect for elders, and supporting each other were all learned naturally and seamlessly within the joint family setup. With urbanisation, single child families are the norm today. As India moves from being a collectivist society into a more individualistic one, children have fewer opportunities to learn empathy, generosity, humility and more.

As an educator, here are a few thoughts I would like to share on how we can encourage and inculcate humility in young people. We can start when they are young, and start small.

A few ways to cultivate humility in young people

Cultivate humility by cultivating empathy. For example, when your child wins a prize, ask your child about the others that didn't and how they are likely to feel (sad, disappointed etc.). This is a reminder to not gloat and boast under such circumstances.

#Ask them about people they might thank in a speech for their victory. It keeps a child grounded and helps them realize that they owe their skills and success to the efforts of others too.

#Make children perform age appropriate chores in the house so that they learn to be helpful house guests when they are visiting relatives, grandparents and others.

#Expose your child to examples of humility from mythology or history so that they can imbibe its importance as a trait.

#If your child excels in a subject (whether it is Math or Music), ask them how they can support others to do better in this and be an enabler. If she is chosen as Captain or as a Prefect, ask how she intends to empower others.

#As the main adults in their children's lives, it's very important for parents to model humility. Children learn the most through observation and imitation of verbal expression by parents and teachers.

#Limit exposure to social media to half an hour a day to keep their perspectives rooted in the real world.

Conclusion

The selfie has become the visual metaphor of our times. Thoughtfulness is not a premium value for the younger generation today. But it's time to reclaim it as we try to foster the quality of humility and highlight its value for children. As the world gets more complicated and difficult to navigate, humility and compassion might serve as strong pillars to support another critical and essential trait in a well-rounded person, i.e. self-esteem.