

OPINION

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To Stem the Decline in Charity Supporters, Pay More Attention to Young Kids

By Beth Breeze, Sara Konrath, and Pamala Wiepking
Philanthropy scholars

Mama, we have to bring cans of food to church this weekend.

Mum, I need money to support a friend running in a race to fight cancer.

Mother, I need to bake a cake to sell for our school fundraiser.

As scholars who study giving, we can't help but notice that like most children, our offspring are constantly being pulled into fundraising activities in and out of school. Yet as a new report shows, most kids struggle to understand these charitable processes — over half are unsure why donations are needed, where the money goes and how it is used. A 5-year-old boy quoted in this report says: "We gave food at the Harvest Festival. I think God must be hungry."

Our children face no shortage of fundraising opportunities, but there's a lack of meaningful involvement in these charitable activities: choosing which nonprofits to support, deciding how to raise the money, and most importantly, having discussions about why we give and how giving helps to care for people whom we don't know and who may be different from us.

While charitable giving is a social norm many parents cultivate in children in their earliest years, they do so with little discussion of why giving is so important to schools, communities, and wider society.

We believe that donors of all ages — including young children — need help understanding why we give and how to do it well. If our youngest citizens are only engaged in giving through transactional approaches (raise the most and you will win prizes!), we may potentially fail to nurture the next generation of informed and enthusiastic givers.

Giving Declines

There are already signs that this may be happening. Research has uncovered generational declines in giving, especially by lower- and middle-income households, as the most recent "Giving USA" figures made clear. Research on empathy in U.S. college students shows that this key personality trait, which involves feeling compassion and imagining others' perspectives, has dropped sharply since 1979. Another study found declines in concern for others among American high-school seniors. Americans also became less trusting of others during this time period.

The emergence of more widely available and accessible adult-donor education programs are hopeful developments. These types of programs teach donors about overhead costs and the different structures and channels for organizing giving, such as donor-advised funds. However, we think donor-education programs should go beyond such technical details, to include the understanding of other people's needs, your personal motivations for giving, and what impacts you hope to make. In other words, giving is a combination of head and heart.

Better and more widely available donor education for adults may promote giving among adults; however, these efforts may all be too little and too late, especially when considering that among youth, key motivators of giving are declining over time. For example, people who care more about others, who imagine their perspectives and feel compassion for their misfortunes, and who view nonprofits as legitimate players are more likely to give to charitable organizations, and give substantially more. Similarly, those who are more trusting of others are more likely to give to nonprofits. Indeed, the top reasons that people say they give is because they care for people in need and because they trust nonprofit organizations with their gifts.

Diverse Contacts

One potential explanation for declines in empathy, altruistic values, and social trust over time could be declining levels of involvement in community activities. This trend has been discussed by many scholars, most notably by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*, which showed that changes in the last decades of the 20th century in relation to work, family structure, and organizational memberships made people increasingly disconnected from one another.

Add to this increasing secularization, political polarization, income inequalities, and the online echo chambers in which we are consuming facts and fiction about the world, and it is not surprising that we have fewer opportunities to experience social interactions with different kinds of people. Like any skill, empathy takes practice and time to improve. Limiting our interactions with others limits the chance to grow our empathy muscles.

While these social forces cannot be addressed all at once, parents and teachers can take concrete steps to cultivate in children the psychological traits associated with giving.

We firmly believe that learning to care and learning to give must start with our youngest children because there is strong evidence that by the time they become young adults, their empathy and altruistic values are firmly in place. Young people spend at least 1,000 hours in school each year and are in school for more years of their lives than earlier generations. Schools are therefore a key location to promote responsiveness and responsibility toward others.

Included in the Curriculum

Some schools already do this: Citizenship has been part of the British national curriculum since the 1990s, and schools in many countries run projects that combine community service and education to instill students with the values that lead to good citizenship. Of course, the effects of these programs depend upon their quality and whether students have opportunities for choice and for reflection.

Warren Buffett's older sister, Doris, incorporates learning and reflection in her well-received effort: the Learning to Give Foundation, which is a free online education program providing resources to teachers to "educate, equip, and empower their students to be giving and caring citizens." Learning to Give lessons have been translated into several other languages and are being used to cultivate giving and caring citizens in South Korea, Germany, and Bulgaria.

The people from the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard University conduct research in schools and families to identify barriers for caring in children, and they offer helpful advice to parents and teachers on how to motivate caring behavior in children. Other tools that use evidence-based approaches to develop empathy in preteens and teenagers are the Random App of Kindness and Phil's Gift Box. Phil's Gift Box is a board game that teaches young children about philanthropy and how to incorporate the spirit of generosity into everyday life. First Give operates in schools across England and Wales to help students learn how best to give their time and talent to improve their communities.

Role Models Are Key

However, much more can — and should — be done. Research shows that children's giving behavior is strongly influenced by role models, so parents and teachers could help by starting to talk more openly about their giving decisions and actions, rather than simply assuming that children will "pick it up."

While online banking and direct debits simplify our financial transactions, one consequence is that children could easily be unaware that the adults they admire are making regular charitable donations. However awkward it may feel, we need to let our kids know that we give (and why we give) if we want them to emulate that behavior. An old-fashioned donation box on the mantelpiece is a simple way of providing visible testimony that this is a charitable household.

Books are also a key ally in efforts to raise charitable children. It is well established that reading fiction promotes empathy because, as the Italian novelist Umberto Eco noted: “The person who doesn’t read lives only one life. The reader lives 5,000.” Stories help transport us into others’ worlds where we can better understand their perspective and gain insights without the costs of travel or the stresses of real-life encounters. This insight is important in light of the major generational declines in reading for fun, and it prompts one of our new research efforts to explore how generosity features in popular children’s storybooks around the world. (We’d welcome suggestions in the comments below.)

As the examples of boxes and books show, encouraging generosity in our children does not need to be difficult. Children demonstrate the capacity for empathy from infancy, so parents and teachers need to trust their children’s generous instincts and be willing to be led by them. As an example, the mother of one of our co-authors recently recovered from cancer. Her children were very distressed at their grandma’s illness, which led to conversations about the existence and impact of cancer-research organizations that could help to one day prevent or cure cancer.

The children then organized their own lemonade stand to raise money for a cancer nonprofit. They raised over \$55 and were pleasantly shocked to find out how generous people can be if asked nicely, as some “customers” gave \$5 instead of the \$1 suggested donation.

It taught them so much, and after their grandma was in remission, they turned their attention to a local family homeless shelter as they noticed people living on the street, felt compassion, and wanted to know what they could do to help. So far, they have raised more than \$200, held a toy drive, and made blankets during the winter. These authentic experiences are teaching them far more than the kind of charitable efforts noted at the very start of this article, where children may succeed in raising funds but fail to learn anything because they are not engaged in the process.

If the downward trends in altruistic values, empathy, and social trust continue, much stronger efforts will be needed to raise new generations of giving and caring citizens. We need to learn how to teach our children to care, before it is too late.

Pamala Wiepking is the Visiting Stead Family Chair in International Philanthropy at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University and professor of societal significance of charitable lotteries at the Center for Philanthropic Studies at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Sara Konrath is an associate professor at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and director of the Interdisciplinary Program for Empathy and Altruism Research. Beth Breeze is director of the Centre for Philanthropy at the University of Kent in Britain.

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1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037