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Give Your Children Genuine Self-Esteem by Teaching Them To Make Someone Else's Life Better

Dr. Michael Ungar, author of "The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids" discusses a simple truth he discovered: "children who do the best have opportunities to show their families they are competent young people able to help others."



Are Children Nowadays More Self-Centered Than In Times Past? Or Less?

What are your thoughts on this topic? Write and tell us what you think.

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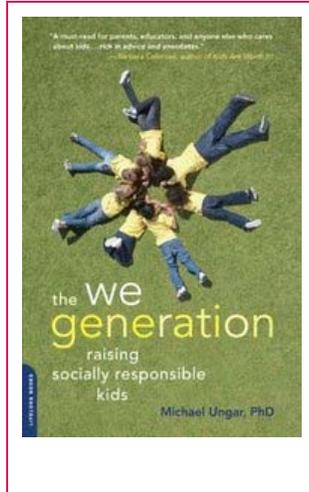
Are we raising loud-mouthed brats? Or children who truly feel connected and responsible for the people around them? In his book, *The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids*, Michael Ungar, Ph.D. shares his thoughts on helping children feel connected and compassionate. He writes, "But when we provide our children homes, schools and communities that ask nothing of them—that allow them to think "Me" instead of "We"—that's when we get into big trouble. We need to create a world around our children that makes it easy for them to learn how to give back to others."

Commitment: What do many children today lack and need that propelled you to write this book?

Michael Ungar, Ph.D.: I'm impressed by the young people I meet in my clinical practice and through my research in a dozen countries. Like generations before them, our children and adolescents today want to be noticed for the contributions they can make. Whether I'm in countries like Colombia, South Africa, Thailand or China, or in the United States, Australia, and Canada, I find a simple truth: children who do the best have opportunities to show their families they are competent young

people able to help others.

If we think about it, this next generation is ready to make a big contribution! Whether five or fifteen, our kids are better connected to their friends, more aware of global issues, and better networked to others who share similar passions like music or sports. And they are far less likely to be full of hate for those who are different from them.



Give kids like this a chance to help others (whether it's at home brushing the dog, or at school organizing a dance) and they will feel like they are important. They will also feel older, more respected, and loved. They will have a genuine sense of self-esteem—the kind that comes from making someone else's life better.

Best of all, as the young people I've worked with in my clinical practice have shown me, and whom were the inspiration for the stories I share in *The We Generation*, children who make a contribution, who are given the chance to think "We," are less likely to need early sexual activity, delinquency, or drugs to feel good about themselves.

Commitment: Do you think we are raising self-centered children?

Dr. Ungar: I'm ashamed to say it, but we adults are often trapped in patterns of Me-thinking. And our children are watching. We love them dearly, and want them to have unfettered childhoods, but when we ask nothing of our children—giving them no real responsibilities, spoiling them—we give them the message that it's okay to think "Me."

When we watch them playing a soccer match and yell insults at the other team, we model Me-thinking. When we give each of our children their own televisions and never expect them to share a remote control we breed isolation and self-centeredness. That teaches our children Me-thinking. But we can also model We-thinking.

After all, our generation has worked hard to address racism, homophobia, and intolerance. It has been us adults who have promoted peace and reached out to victims of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the Tsunami of 2005. That's what our kids need to see. Our children can grow beyond self-centeredness if we show them how.

Commitment: What type of connections do children need? How can we as parents nurture these connections?

Dr. Ungar: Children are more likely to think "We" when provided with homes, communities, and schools that make connections easier. I see this happening all around the world. In the worst, most violent communities, I've seen school principals who greet all their students by name and make them feel like they belong at school rather than installing metal detectors at the school doors. I've seen families move from sprawling suburbs to denser urban housing because it's safer!

And their child can actually make a contribution to the family by going and buying a litre of milk at a store that is close enough to walk to. Of course, suburbs and large homes aren't necessarily bad.

But when we provide our children homes, schools and communities that ask nothing of them—that allow them to think "Me" instead of "We"—that's when we get into big trouble.

We need to create a world around our children that makes it easy for them to learn how to give back to others.

I've met families who have a lot of advantages, but still want their children to avoid the perils of selfishness. They:

- **Put younger kids in daycare at least half a day a week to help them learn how to socialize**
- **Downsize their homes so people interact more (they have one family room instead of three!).**
- **They make sure their homes are places their children's friends feel comfortable dropping in.**
- **They encourage their children to attend a neighborhood school so they can feel a part of their community.**
- **They give their children chores that make them feel a part of their families. They don't pay them to do them either, but instead expect children to participate as full members of their households.**

Commitment: Can you share with us five ways parents can help their children feel more connected?

Dr. Ungar: Children of different ages will experience connections differently.

But no matter how old they are, all children can be helped to feel connected. Here are the top five ways I've learned to do this:

- **Give children clear expectations about their behavior.** Given a present? Then it should be expected the child says "Thank you." Dinner is ready in a few minutes? Children should have some role in meal preparation and clean-up.
- **Encourage children to participate in a group activity.** A school band or team sport like rugby or soccer helps a child understand he has a responsibility to others if everyone is to succeed.
- **Involve a child in fundraising, or act of charity for those who are disadvantaged.** Even little kids can stroll along in walkathons. Older children can actively raise money for a charity that holds some special meaning to them. An aunt has died of breast cancer? Then invite the child to participate in one of the campaigns to raise research dollars for that particular disease. The more meaningful the act of charity is to the child, the more a child is likely to understand how her actions affect others.
- **Encourage your child to get to know people from different backgrounds as well as his own.** Take children to cultural festivals. Travel with them. Become a host family for a foreign student.
- **Provide children with age-appropriate rites of passage.** A child who experiences herself as getting older and having more responsibilities will feel better connected to her family, school, and community. A five-year-old can be given the responsibility to choose what he wears or help look after a family pet. A ten-year-old can help cook a meal. A fifteen-year-old can help plan a family vacation.

Commitment: Much of your book is based on the premise that "A happy life is based on relationships and companionship." Do you feel many children lack the relationships and companionship they need?

Dr. Ungar: I'm not convinced that all that text-messaging and on-line screen time necessarily destroys our children's connections with others. I've seen children use their electronic networks to fight bullying, to organize social gatherings, and to help fundraise. As parents, spend some time with your child and try to understand whether he is connected to others or not. You may find that children's patterns of play and communication look different than a generation ago, but that they are as or more connected as we adults once were.

A child may be chatting with ten friends on MSN simultaneously, while I had just one on the phone at a time when I was my child's age. I still see my own children inviting their friends over to play, even if the children all bring their computers and are playing an online game in which each is a warrior in a virtual world.

Commitment: What opportunities do children need to be provided and what do they need to be taught to have these relationships?

Dr. Ungar: As parents we can influence our children and teach them the social skills they'll need to be great parents, spouses, and citizens. We do this by ensuring that there are special times they share with us as a family. Times when we can connect with them through our words and our touch. Include in your day or week a time when all the electronic gadgets are turned off. Insist the family eat together. Insist that when the grandparents come for a visit, the children sit and talk for at least a half an hour. Take your kids out for an activity as a family (a meal, a walk, a sporting event) at least once a week. There are lots of ways children can sustain connections with us.

Commitment: You wrote, "*Compassion, connection, responsibility, citizenship-this is the cycle we want to start at home. The alternative is selfishness, alienation, exploitation, and disenfranchisement. Big words to describe the loud-mouthed brats we meet who know nothing of their obligations to anyone else.*" How can parents teach their children to be responsible citizens who care about those around them?

Dr. Ungar: When I meet really rude kids, I usually also encounter parents who are struggling to teach their children to think about others. The biggest problem I see is parents who don't hold their children accountable for their actions.

I describe in *The We Generation* "Idiot compassion." That's compassion that makes adults feel secure, that avoids conflict with our children, but doesn't give kids the experiences they need to develop the life skills necessary to act responsibly. Idiot compassion is a term Buddhists use to describe someone who helps others in ways that makes the helper feel good but shortchanges the one being helped.

If parents want a child to avoid behaving badly, then parents need to insist that their child suffer the consequences of bad behavior. For example, if my young teenager is burning me out with rudeness and I am feeling hurt, then I don't have to drive her to the mall, or buy her the extra special breakfast cereal she likes. In other words, I can make it uncomfortable for my child to be rude. This is not punishment. This is discipline. I am helping my child see that her actions have an effect on others.

Need another example? A teen who selfishly breaches her curfew, requiring both of her parents (who have day jobs) to stay up well past midnight worrying, is a child who needs to understand that her parents work hard and need to sleep if the family

is to survive financially. The child needs to understand she plays a part in how well the family does. If the parents aren't able to do their work, then there should be less money for fancy clothes or new sporting gear. That's giving a child concretely what she needs to learn. Yelling at the child, or grounding an older teen, isn't going to solve the problem. But inviting the youth to understand she has a contribution to make to her family (like coming in on time), while respecting her right to negotiate a reasonable curfew, helps a child think "We" instead of "Me."

Commitment: You wrote that it is important that children understand the needs of others. What are the needs of others that a child should have an understanding of?

Dr. Ungar: A child begins at home to learn that others have both physical and emotional needs. Even rough housing with our kids on the floor teaches them a huge amount about how to touch others, and how to properly be touched.

When the play gets too rough, as it inevitably does, and someone gets hurt (just a little), there is a moment when a young child will realize that what he does can make others feel bad, both physically and emotionally.

Roll the clock ahead a decade and it's no different with a teenager. The bratty rude child who swears at a parent needs to hear from the parent how those words have made the parent feel. Don't get angry. Be honest. Make your child understand that what he does can ruin another's day. Of course, what he does can also make someone else feel special.

Commitment: When young girls become sexually promiscuous, do you feel it is related to not being touched enough by their parents or loved enough?

Dr. Ungar: It's an interesting question, but I've never met a girl who has been sexually active early or with repeated partners who is looking for touch. Most often, she is looking for the sense of attachment that can be mistakenly found through sex. The rush of feeling older and more powerful when someone pays attention to her is the real draw.

I talk a lot about the value of touch in *The We Generation* but its ability to prevent sexual promiscuity is indirect. Offer a child, girl or boy, a way to feel connected to others through intense physical and emotional connections with their family (and other caring adults) and most will delay sexual initiation until it is a choice made out of curiosity or desire, and done without self-endangerment.

That said, we do need to touch our children more. If not physically, then with our focused attention and gaze. With the exception of children who have been abused, most children and even adolescents crave genuine physical contact with adults. When we touch children in appropriate ways we tell them they are important to us. Of course, it's perfectly normal for an 11-year-old to pull back from his parent when being given a peck on the cheek on school grounds, but that same youngster will be quite happy to receive a hug out of sight of his friends before going to bed at night.

Coaches, teachers, and other adults also have a role to play. There are safe ways to put a friendly arm around a child's shoulders. Our children need this if they are to feel important and cared for, and if they are to understand how one shows compassion for others. A child who is shown by his caregivers how to touch is a child who will grow up and know how to gently and lovingly touch others.

If we avoid all touch with kids, how will they ever learn to distinguish between good touches and bad touches? How will they ever learn how to show affection for others in a way that isn't threatening or intrusive? I like to joke that we do our child's

future spouse a favor when we model for our child how to touch by touching them in appropriate and sensitive ways.

Commitment: What are some tips to help a child be a more responsible citizen?

Dr. Ungar: Among the many examples I give in *The We Generation*, some of my favorite ways to make a child a more responsible citizen include:

- **Encourage a child to make friends with a child who is new in her school, who doesn't have any friends, or looks different from the other children.**
- **Watch the news with your child, muting parts that are too violent or otherwise age-inappropriate.**
- **Talk to your child about how you solve problems at work when there is conflict.**
- **Take your child to a political rally or demonstration, but be sure to let you child offer his own opinion on what he thinks about the issues.**
- **Look a homeless person in the eye and encourage your child to say hello respectfully.**
- **Ask your child to make a donation to a charity that means something to her.**
- **Play a game from another culture, like Chinese Go, or do activities together that help your child understand the world is a big and diverse place.**
- **Travel beyond the walls of an all-inclusive resort in a country where the culture is different from your own. Meet other children who live there.**
- **Help a neighbor.**
- **Attend a religious ceremony, or visit a church, mosque, shrine, or temple that is different from your family's place of worship.** It will help your child understand the diversity of his community and develop tolerance for others.
- **Talk about issues like child poverty, war, and foreign aid with children when they are old enough to wonder about how the world works and their place in it.**
- **Take your child with you when you vote. Model for him how to be a responsible citizen.**

Commitment: Chapter seven is titled: "Monster Homes Make Monstrous Children." How can the design of a home alienate a child?

Dr. Ungar: Children are more likely to think "We" when provided with homes that make connections easier. How strange it is to meet children in my clinical practice who live in sprawling homes that meet their every material need, and yet starve them of connections. These are homes so large children barely cross paths with their parents. The children tell me how sad they feel. There is no common television room. Meals are eaten separately. And where there are common spaces, parents insist they be kept clear of children's toys, banishing their little ones to basements

and bedrooms where they can be out of sight, and sadly, feel out of mind.

And yet, to raise “We-thinking” kids, we need to make them feel they are a part of our lives. I see this happening all around the world. I’ve seen families move from sprawling suburbs to denser urban housing where people are able to watch out for each other’s children from porches that face out to the street, keeping garages tucked unobtrusively in the alleyways behind.

When people sit outside and can watch children coming and going and neighbours know each other’s names, our children become sewn into the fabric of their communities. It’s not that the suburbs or large homes are bad. Rural homes and city homes can pose the same threats to a child’s healthy development. But when we provide our children homes and communities that ask nothing of them—that allow them to think “Me” instead of “We”—that’s when we get into trouble.

We don’t necessarily need to sell our homes. But we need to make some changes. Insist your family eat together as often as possible. No food is to be taken to a child’s bedroom! Have fewer televisions and teach children to share. Have a family pet and insist children do their part looking after it. For younger children, make sure their playroom is close to the kitchen, the traditional place of gathering in most homes.

Commitment: Do you think children should be allowed an iPod, if in a sense it isolates them from the world around them?

Dr. Ungar: I think we are long past wondering whether these things are good or bad. They are a part of our children’s worlds, as they are for us adults. The trick is now to use them responsibly and in ways that build connections. I love asking my son to upload music onto my iPod so I can know what he’s listening to. I love to see how kids surf the web and find interesting eclectic blends of world beats. I appreciate the way our children’s choice of music has become much more democratic than in my day when a few large distributors controlled what we listened to.

But I also insist that there be times in the car on trips that the iPods are turned off, or that we all listen to the same music and talk about what we are hearing. My children are frequently very good about introducing me to new sounds and laughing at my shock at some of what I hear.

Commitment: You write that it is important that children have relationships with adults other than just their parents. How can parents find suitable, safe adults, who do not turn out to be sexual predators, to be in their children’s lives?

Dr. Ungar: As I pointed out in an earlier book, *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*, our children today are actually much safer from sexual exploitation than a generation ago. Fewer children are being abused, and fewer children kidnapped. Having relationships with safe adults is something parents should encourage their children to do.

Of course, we still need to teach children how to assess situations. Ask your child, “How does it feel when you are with _____?” If a child never has an experience with other adults, then how will he ever learn to know how to talk to strangers, keep himself safe, or behave in different social situations? Having no contact with other adults actually puts children more, not less, at risk later in their lives!

There are lots of interesting adults for our children to encounter. Our extended families are full of colorful characters. Then there’s coaches and teachers, most of whom now go through rigorous checks to ensure they are safe. If we are part of a religion, there’s spiritual leaders too, many of whom now are trained in how to appropriately be with children in order to avoid the mistakes of the past. Still

worried about sexual predators, especially on the web? Be sure your child's computer is somewhere you can monitor what they are doing and have open frank discussions about what can happen on line.

Commitment: Parents everywhere wish for a more intimate, village-like childhood for their children, but it is often not possible. How can we as parents, with all the stresses we face, create a village-like childhood for our children, despite the reality that many of us live in impersonal suburbs?

Dr. Ungar: If you have to drive your child everywhere, you are facing an uphill battle creating a village-like atmosphere for your child. What I've learned from children with whom I do research around the world is that a child who can navigate her way around her community is the child who feels connected. I don't mean a child who is left alone and unwatched. I mean a child who can go get a jug of milk at the store, or who can walk to school (where it is safe to do so). The children who survive best can do these things. They know how to get around their communities.

You can help your child by living in places where there is denser housing. Not possible? Then be sure your child is enrolled in activities with other children. Better yet, get your child to volunteer and help others in their community. I'm also a big fan of sleepovers for children because of the many things children learn when they are away from home. Meet the other child's parents, then encourage your child to spend the night. It will teach your child to trust other adults, and even better, how to behave in new situations. Don't be surprised if your child returns home feeling a little more independent and with a bit more commonsense.

Commitment: What are some ways grandparents can be an important part of a child getting the nurturing and sense of belonging they need?

Dr. Ungar: The advantages of knowing our grandparents, or an elder in our community, is the sense of place it gives us. For children, a grandparent's stories give a sense of continuity between the past and the present. They tell the child where he belongs.

Strangely, I see grandparents that are being valued far more in other countries than my own. If your child does have a grandparent (or an elderly person who can be a grandparent substitute, like an older uncle, or family friend), be sure to have your child visit, or even better, have your child do an activity with them.

My own daughter has spent afternoons cooking with her grandmother. And my son has travelled to see his grandfather just to get help with a special woodworking project he had underway. I meet other families that encourage lots of contact between generations. It's a win-win situation for everyone. Parents get a break. Kids get a sense of where they come from and the values that are important in life. And grandparents are told they are valued and have something to offer this next generation. Somewhere in that mix of interactions our children are sure to learn how to think "We".

To Purchase *The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids* [click here.](#)

About the Author: Michael Ungar, Ph.D. is the author of seven books and more than 60 articles and book chapters. His works include *We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids*, *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*, *Playing at Being Bad: The Hidden Resilience of Troubled Teens and Strengths-based Counseling with At-risk Youth*. He has practiced for over 25 years as a Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist with children and families in child welfare, mental health, educational and correctional settings. Now a Professor at the School of Social Work, at Dalhousie

University in Halifax, Canada, he leads an international team of resilience researchers that spans more than a dozen countries on six continents. In addition to his research and writing interests, Dr. Ungar maintains a small family therapy practice for troubled children, youth and their families. He lives in Halifax with his partner and their two teenaged children.

Visit his web site at: www.michaelungar.com

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