**D is for Denmark**

We have all probably heard that Denmark is a nation where happiness levels are the highest on Earth – not surprisingly, the kids are taught to care for one another from a young age as part of their education system.

Jessica Alexander has stated in her book *The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids* that from an evolutionary standpoint, empathy is a valuable impulse that helps humans survive in groups. Are Danish children just naturally more sensitive than their global peers? Not necessarily. In Denmark, a nation that has consistently been voted the happiest place in the world since Richard Nixon was president, children are taught about empathy from a young age both inside and outside of school. Perhaps the empathy impulse in the children from other countries has been lying dormant for lack of focus, which then leads to an empathy gap.

A brief interesting insight into the Danish School System is justified. Within the Danish school education system there is a mandatory national program called Step by Step as early as preschool. Children are shown pictures of kids who are each exhibiting different emotions: sadness, fear, anger, frustration, happiness, and so on. The students talk about these cards and put into words what the child is sensing, learning to conceptualize their own and others’ feelings. They learn empathy, problem-solving, self-control, and how to read facial expressions. An essential part of the program is that the facilitators and children aren’t judgmental of the emotions they see; instead, they simply recognize and respect those sentiments.

Another program, which is increasingly popular is called CAT-kit. This program is aimed at improving emotional awareness and empathy and focuses on how to articulate experiences, thoughts, feelings, and senses. Tools in the CAT-kit include picture cards of faces, measuring sticks to gauge intensity of emotions, and pictures of the body, on which participants can draw the physical aspects and location of emotions. Another tool is called My Circle:
children draw their friends, family members, professionals, and strangers in different parts of the circle as part of an exercise on learning to better understand others.

Denmark’s Mary Foundation—named after the country’s crown princess and soon-to-be queen—has contributed to empathy training in schools, as well. This anti-bullying program, which has been implemented across the country, encourages 3- to 8-year-olds to talk about bullying and teasing and to learn to become more caring toward each other. It has yielded positive results, and more than 98% of teachers say they would recommend it to other institutions. To learn more about this project visit the following website: http://www.maryfonden.dk/en/about.

Another less obvious example of empathy training in Danish schools is in how they subtly and gradually mix children of different strengths and weaknesses together. Students who are stronger academically are taught alongside those who are less strong; shyer kids with more extroverted ones, and so on. The goal is for the students to see that everyone has positive qualities and to support each other in their efforts reach the next level. The math whiz may be terrible at soccer, and vice versa. This system fosters collaboration, teamwork, and respect.

Studies show that this system of interactive teaching involves a steep learning curve. Students who teach others work harder to understand the material, recall it more precisely, and use it more effectively. But they also have to try to understand the perspective of other students so they can help them where they are having trouble. The ability to explain complicated subject matter to another student is not an easy task, but it is an invaluable life skill. Research demonstrates that this type of collaboration and empathy also delivers a deep level of satisfaction and happiness to kids; interestingly, people’s brains actually register more satisfaction from cooperating than from winning alone.

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that empathy is one of the single most important factor in fostering successful leaders, entrepreneurs, managers, and businesses. It reduces bullying, increases one’s capacity to forgive, and greatly improves relationships and social interactions. Empathy enhances the quality of meaningful relationships, which research suggests is one of the most important factors in a person’s sense of well-being. Research also suggests that empathetic teenagers tend to be more successful because they are more purpose-driven than their more narcissistic counterparts. And if you think about it, it all makes sense. Successful people don’t operate alone; every human needs the support of others to achieve positive results in his or her life. Maybe by focusing on actively teaching empathy to children as they do in Denmark, schools globally will make happier adults in the future.

Sources:


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