KQED News

MindShift How we will learn.

BIG IDEAS (HTTPS://WW2.KQED.ORG/MINDSHIFT/CATEGORY/BIG-IDEAS/)

How Making Kindness a Priority Benefits Students

iStock/AkilinaWinner

By Linda Flanagan (https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/author/lindaflan/) (http://twitter.com/LindaFlanagan2)
JUNE 6, 2017

SHARE

He goes by Ice, but Tanapat Treyanurak is known among his peers at Hamilton College for his disarming warmth. He grew up in a village in Thailand, where he lived with two older brothers, his mother and father, and his grandmother. Both parents worked long hours, so Ice spent considerable time with his grandmother, who encouraged him to be kind.

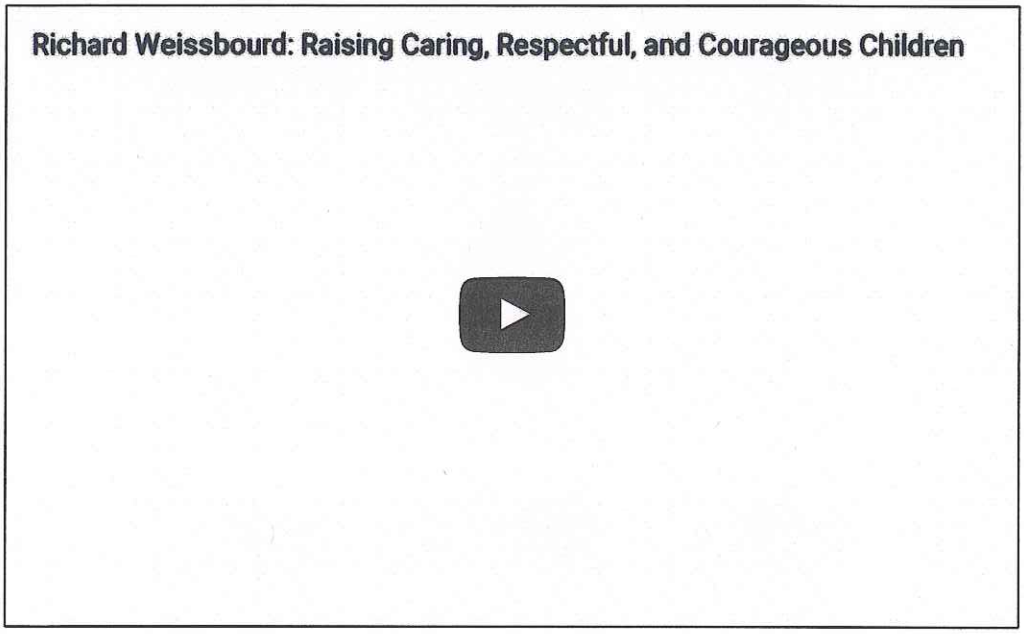
At the small international school he attended for 10 years, Ice heard the same message from teachers and coaches: Listen to others, be considerate, think beyond yourself. Ice remembers the unusual kindness of his middle school phys ed teacher, who made a special effort to include and encourage the athletically unskilled, and who never let bullies get away with casual cruelty.

Ice absorbed these lessons and has applied them throughout his life. At college in New York, he smiles at everyone, treats strangers he meets like future friends, and sets his own work aside to help others. "More often than not, it pays to smile at people and say 'hi,' and to help when I can," Ice said. He has avoided campus cliques, remaining friendly with disconnected groups, and serves as a resident adviser in one of the student dorms. His conscious effort to be kind "started off as listening to my grandmother and my teachers growing up," Ice said. "And the more I did it, the more rewarding it became."

Treating others with kindness was at the center of Ice's family and his school. But for many students in the U.S., the importance of being kind trails behind other cultural values. In a 2014 Harvard study (https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/mcc-research-report.pdf) of 10,000 middle and high school kids, 80 percent of the students said they value achievement and happiness over caring for others. While 96 percent of parents report that they want above all for their children to be caring, 81 percent of kids said they believe their parents value achievement and happiness more. A similar math holds for students and teachers: 62 percent of kids believe their teachers prize academic success above all. And this thinking affects student behavior: The very same kids who rank caring for others behind happiness and achievement, and who believe their parents want the same, scored low on an empathy scale.

It matters that the young learn to be kind because a caring outlook is linked to positive life outcomes across multiple domains.

"It's the basis of a democratic and ethical society," said Rick Weissbourd (https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/richard-weissbourd), author of *The Parents We Mean to Be*, who serves as Faculty Director of the Making Caring Common project at Harvard. For free societies to function, citizens need to look beyond narrow self-interest and consider the public good. A singular focus on achievement undercuts the basis of a civil culture, which depends on cooperation and personal sacrifice for the betterment of all.



Wharton psychology professor Adam Grant, author of *Give and Take* (http://www.adamgrant.net/): *A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, has made a career of showing how generosity at work leads to professional advancement. Contrary to the conventional notion that job wins require a kind of ruthless selfishness, especially in business, Grant has found that most who are generous with their ideas and time—and who have figured out how to collaborate and network—have better professional outcomes than their less charitable colleagues. Provided that the "givers" don't lose sight of their own interests, and so avoid becoming exploited, kind employees advance at higher rates than their self-centered peers.

Strong relationships, too, are grounded in kindness. Recent research on marriage reveals that regular acts of kindness and generosity fasten couples together. (Contempt, on the other hand, divides them.) Psychologists John and Julie Gottman, who study marital stability through the Gottman Institute (https://www.gottman.com/about/research/couples/), found that particular types of kindness are especially valuable in a marriage: being charitable about the partner's intention—i.e., not assuming the worst when things go wrong—and celebrating the spouse's successes. The Gottmans report that this "active constructive responding," as they call it, when partners react positively and enthusiastically about their mate's success, is associated with high-quality, long-term relationships.

And kids learn more when kindness and tolerance run through a school culture. "The school community functions so much better when kids have strong social-emotional skills," Weissbourd said. Having empathy, being able to consider another's perspective, and managing one's own emotions and actions, all of which are connected to kindness, are linked to academic success (http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_264_final_2.pdf). The converse is also true: schools with hostile cultures, where kids feel threatened and distracted, make learning more difficult. And students who lack trusting relationships with teachers are also at a learning disadvantage.

Research shows that social and emotional skills, including kindness, can be taught and learned, and that children benefit from the lessons. According to a 2011 review (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21291449) of 213 programs designed to teach social and emotional skills in school to children of all ages, kids who took part in the initiatives improved their outlook and behavior toward others. They also had better academic performance and showed improved social-emotional awareness.

Some might ask if it makes sense to focus on teaching kids how to get along. Isn't it important for them to learn how to assert themselves, to speak up for what they believe, regardless of others' feelings? Alison Cashin, who works alongside Weissbourd at Making Caring Common, believes it's possible to protest and demand change without resorting to nastiness. Advocacy work and kindness are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, social justice warriors would be wise to see their opponents through a lens of kindness and concern, Cashin said, "so we don't lose the context of what we're advocating for."

For those who doubt whether it's the business of schools to teach children how to be kind, Weissbourd has some questions of his own. "Why is achievement important? Why is happiness important?" He finds the question odd. Kindness, he said, is at the core of what it means to be human. "Being human is to care for other people," he said. "Why should we teach anything?"

EXPLORE: BIG IDEAS (HTTPS://WW2.KQED.ORG/MINDSHIFT/CATEGORY/BIG-IDEAS/), KINDNESS (HTTPS://WW2.KQED.ORG/MINDSHIFT/TAG/KINDNESS/), NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS (HTTPS://WW2.KQED.ORG/MINDSHIFT/TAG/NON-COGNITIVE-SKILLS/), SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (HTTPS://WW2.KQED.ORG/MINDSHIFT/TAG/SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL-LEARNING/)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=facebook&nb=1)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=twitter&nb=1)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=linkedin&nb=1)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=pinterest&nb=1)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=google-plus-1&nb=1)

(https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/ho
making-kindness-a-priority-benefits-students/?
share=email&nb=1)

**1 Comment (https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2017/06/06/how-making-kindness-a-priorit
utm_medium=Email&utm_source=ExactTarget&utm_campaign=20170611Mindshift&mc_key=00Qi0(**

HOST

AUTHOR

LINDA FLANAGAN

Linda Flanagan is a freelance writer, researcher, and editor. Her work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Wall St. Journal, Newsweek, Running Times, and Mind/Shift, and she blogs regularly for the Huffington Post. Linda writes

about education, culture, athletics, youth sports, mental health, politics, college admissions, and other curiosities. She also reviews books and conducts interviews.

VIEW ALL POSTS BY THIS HOST (https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/author/lindaflan/) **VIEW ALL POSTS BY THIS AUTHOR** (https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/author/lindaflan/)

ABOUT MINDSHIFT

MindShift explores the future of learning in all its dimensions. **Learn more about MindShift (http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/about/)**

ABOUT KQED

About KQED (http://www.kqed.org/about/)
Jobs (http://www.kqed.org/about/jol
Internships (http://www.kqed.org/ab
Donate to KQED (https://www.kqed.c
Website help (http://www.kqed.org/a