PFA Tips

Giving Back

As parents and caregivers, we spend a great deal of time trying to obtain the services, treatments, products, medications, funding, etc. that our children need. It's easy for us to fall into the trap of creating an environment where our children expect people to do ***for*** them, or focus primarily on ***their*** needs. We forget that the people we care for should be able to experience opportunities to do something nice for us or others. The holidays offer the perfect opportunity to turn the tables on your child and teach them to do things for other people.

Presume intellect, assume a generous spirit

So maybe some of our children don't appear to have any interest in giving to, or doing for others, or even understanding why they should. Acts of kindness, orchestrated by us, demonstrated by us, will foster social interaction, increase concern for others, and lessen self-focused tendencies.

Depending on your child, you may want to start with a simple social story that explains how you can help others, why you would help someone, and, finally, how it makes you feel. Yes, **feelings**. An abstract concept that with enough "practice" can create a true experience in being generous.

We ALL have something to give

We often don't allow our loved ones with autism to develop that sense of reciprocity and giving back. Not intentionally, but we tend to focus on giving TO them. We rob them of their natural gifts when we don't give them opportunities to give back.

Giving back extends beyond the holidays

During the holidays, charitable openings might be more visible. But look for opportunities throughout the year whether it's disaster relief for a geographic region or a friend's post on Facebook looking for help for a local family's tragedy.

Pack it up!

It's a win-win for you, your children, and someone less fortunate, if your children clean up their rooms and donate the toys they no longer use. (Be warned, they can change their minds!)

Furry friends volunteer too

Is it easier for the person you care for to relate to animals? Then take pets to visit people in nursing homes, or help kids read with service dogs, or volunteer to care for someone else's pet. Volunteering at The Humane Society is another option, along with visiting your local PetCo and petting and playing with the cats who are waiting to be adopted.

Sometimes the thought counts the most

Let your loved ones share their perspective. They have gifts of seeing, hearing, feeling, and understanding things on a different level. We can learn so much when we appreciate what they can teach the rest of us that have limited senses by comparison. And don't let words get in the way. If the person is low verbal, let them communicate through gestures, pictures, etc. Although my daughter is neurotypical, one year for her community service project she read the book "Taking Autism to School" to her class to help others have a better understanding of what her brother, and other schoolmates, might be experiencing.

Pay it forward

This is an important concept that may be difficult for people to grasp due to its more abstract nature. It can be hard explaining that an act of kindness doesn't need to be a back-and-forth exchange to count. Demonstrating it can help make this a concrete idea. I used an occasion where my family was given a gift card and I taught my kids the concept of paying it forward by taking them to the store and using the card to make purchases for Toys for Tots.

Play to their strengths

The key to making reciprocity meaningful is to concentrate on what people can do. Refuse to categorize people; begin by listing their uniqueness. What people can do tells us how they can make a contribution to our lives. When my daughter was young, she loved crafts, so she made 24 fringe scarves and delivered them to the pediatric ward at our local hospital. She wrapped each one in

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a gift bag and included a little get well card. Imagine her joy when two months later we learned that someone we knew was the recipient of one of her scarves. If the person loves yard work, they can clean up a park, or offer to help beautify an area. If food is their passion, volunteer at a soup kitchen. Can your child build ***anything*** with LEGOs? Let them put those skills to use and help a neighbor assemble toys on Christmas Eve. Maybe your child's strength is being with you and helping pick items for an Angel Tree gift or other community giving program.

Start at home

If volunteering, and doing for others, is a new concept you are introducing to your loved one, then begin at home and practice acts of generosity on family members. You may want to consider offering reward incentives for each act during the initial phase. You can start small – pull a chair out for someone at the table or clear someone else's dinner plates, offer to pour a drink or make a snack for a sibling, offer to carry something for another person, etc. I nearly cried when one day I saw my rubbing my daughter's back because she was upset. And yes, doing something nice for the dog counts.

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