

Parental power: shaping the future

How can the average parent contribute to vast human issues like world peace? By loving your children, says Claire who shares this story:

We are three young mothers, chatting over coffee at Sarah's home. Our children, six between us aged from three to twelve years, are energetically at play nearby. As the afternoon progresses, the inevitable occurs. The children grow tired, their play becomes argumentative, there are yells, fights and tears.

I watch Sarah as she resolves the dispute between two seven year olds over a scooter. Moments later she is tending to a war between her three year old and the formidable alliance of two eight year olds. I note with admiration Sarah's patience and willingness to understand the child's perspective. She applies a firm hand without accusations or a tendency to side with one child. She takes the time to listen to what has happened, then assists the children to work it out. I can see these young ones learning from her encouragement and guidance. Sometimes it's a lesson in accepting responsibility. Or it might be a lesson in sharing and letting go, giving in to a younger sibling even when it seems unfair to the older one. Other times the interaction leads to a discussion about how to make a method of play safer or more inclusive.

Sarah's patience is astonishing. How much easier it would be

to just yell at the kids to 'cut it out' or 'give back the scooter' or 'go play outside, away from us grown-ups'. I know that Sarah wants to sit and finish her cup of coffee in peace, but she is choosing to be a loving presence to these children and seizing the opportunity to be an active parent. She is teaching them about reconciliation and peacemaking, about how to conduct genuine relationships. Her care and commitment are obvious.

I turn to Deb and voice my thoughts. 'She's an inspiration,' I say.

'You should tell her,' says Deb. 'Sarah sees herself as a poor parent.'

When Sarah returns I praise her for her parenting skills. She swiftly deflects the compliment. 'I'm not a natural parent,' she groans. 'Anything good I do I've modelled on Deb.' She then quotes a piece of advice Deb once gave her. It is an insight about giving uncooperative children clear options so that they don't box themselves into a no-win situation. My ears are pricked. 'Sarah, I've heard you quote that advice to me. I thought it was so wise! I've been trying to apply it to my own kids.' Meanwhile Deb is shaking her head, wondering how on earth she could have come up with anything so profound.

By this stage our conversation is becoming absurdly circular. The three of us look at each other and laugh. Here we are, three mothers struggling to raise

our children, each thinking she is failing as a parent. And yet, without realising it, we have been inspiring one another all along. I leave that morning uplifted, encouraged and having learnt so much.

We see ourselves as ordinary family people, far removed from international commissions on peace or the politics of reconciliation. And yet world peace and reconciliation have their roots in the humble events of domestic life. We parents are in the business of forming human hearts. We are shaping the world's future. •

