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How to Raise Your Child to Be a Philanthropist

Experts advise to start talking to children about philanthropy when they're young and continue to have those discussions as they grow



To raise a future philanthropist, experts say, start early talking to your child about giving, and let them see what you do.
ILLUSTRATION: KEVIN VAN AELST FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **VERONICA DAGHER**

Updated March 19, 2017 11:03 p.m. ET

Many parents want their children to grow up to be philanthropic.

The hard part is knowing when—and how—to start instilling a sense of philanthropy in them.

Experts in the world of philanthropy offer several approaches.

But there is a consensus that it's important to start talking to children about philanthropy early in their lives and continue to have those discussions as they grow.

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The Wall Street Journal invited three people to join in an email discussion of the issue. They are Mark Ottoni-Wilhelm, professor of economics at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and professor of philanthropic studies at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy; Una Osili, professor of economics and director of research at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy; and Alison Powell, senior director, philanthropy, at the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit consulting group for

philanthropists.

Following are edited excerpts of the discussion.

Not just for the wealthy

WSJ: *Why should parents want to teach their children to be philanthropists?*

MS. POWELL: Embedded in philanthropy is often the concept of empathy, a critical social and emotional skill. Ultimately, if parents value philanthropy and wish to support empathy development in their children, it is likely they will want to pass this value on to their children.

At its heart, giving money away is an “unnatural act.” It’s possible (and if my kids are any example, likely) that encouraging kids to give away their own money and toys may be met with initial resistance without relevant context, modeling and reinforcement.

WSJ: *How do you make children understand that philanthropy isn’t just for the wealthy?*

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: Even if your resources are small, you can still be charitable. And you can still be a “philanthropist” in the sense of choosing to support an organization that uses what you consider to be an effective approach to achieving the good you want to achieve.

And remember, raising charitable children plays out over long time spans—generations. You may be middle-income now, but your child when grown may be wealthy. Imagine if the parents of Bill and Melinda Gates, thinking themselves to be not wealthy, had thought there was little point in teaching their children to be charitable.

MS. POWELL: Being charitable is more about the mind-set than the dollars attached. Donors can support their causes with more than simply money. Your kids can observe you using your specific skills (sitting on a board, providing pro bono assistance) or prioritizing your time (volunteering in a soup kitchen) for a cause you care about.

WSJ: *What are some strategies families of all wealth levels can use to teach their children to be philanthropists?*

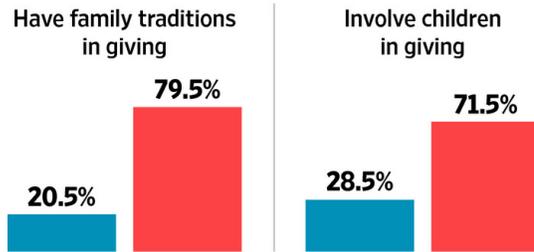
MS. POWELL: I’d highlight three things.

1. Focus: With the caveat that philanthropy is a portfolio, not just one thing (for example: giving back to institutions like one’s alma mater, responding to requests, as well as particular causes), we’ve observed that philanthropy success often comes from focusing on fewer things, over longer periods, with the majority of one’s giving. The

Pay It Forward

The percentage of surveyed high-net-worth donors who say that they:

■ Yes ■ No



Note: Percentages calculated among households who have children, grandchildren or younger relatives.

Playing a Part

The reasons high-net-worth donors say they involve children or other younger relatives in their giving

77%
It is personally rewarding to involve them

43%
They are interested in participating in these decisions

30%
They have similar charitable priorities and values

18%
It is convenient to involve them (time, geography, etc.)

17%
They have relevant experience to contribute to the decision-making process

5%
Other

Note: Percentages calculated among households that involve children, grandchildren or younger relatives in their giving activity.

Source: U.S. Trust Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy, 2016
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

opposite can lead to fragmented results and effort. This finding translates well with teaching skills to children. Rather than have kids see scattershot giving, better to have them learn (and observe) what you care about, why, and how that has translated into the lion's share of your time and giving.

2. As I mentioned above, it isn't always all about money: Time and influence are gifts as well.

3. Do your homework: There are lots of causes and nonprofits out there. If kids hear about something in the news or at school and want to get involved, you can help them to research where to give. Rather than expect them to follow your footsteps, you can share your journey. Then you can introduce them to age-appropriate research tools. (How might they sponsor a child? What environmental causes should they support—saving a species or protecting land?)

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: For younger children, when they are old enough to be given

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money over which they have discretion, like an allowance, the three jars---spend, save, give---is a good approach. And engagement: hands-on volunteering for young children, because giving money to an organization through the internet or the mail so that the organization can work to achieve some good is pretty abstract.

Then when the child is old enough to get this abstraction, teach them to remain engaged by following that organization's activities and progress. Focus on the emotional uplift the good work does for the people who are helped. And reflection. Teach your children to think about why they are charitable, what it means to them. And biographies of charitable/philanthropic "heroes."

When to start

WSJ: At what age should you start teaching your children?

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: As soon as they are old enough to help someone else by some kind of volunteering. As soon as they are old enough to receive an allowance. And before that, engage them in doing "chores" for the family: more than just cleaning up their own space, but doing something for the good of other people in the family.

The earlier the better, or I should say, the earlier the easier. If you haven't started before spending and time-use patterns are taking shape in adolescence, it is going to be hard. In doing research on parent socialization of children's giving, colleagues and I found that 16% of parents switch off talking, meaning that they talked to their children about giving when their children were young, but stopped when children became older adolescents. That is a mistake in terms of raising charitable children, because we found that a parent who talks to a child about giving increases the likelihood that the child gives by at least 13 percentage points.

MS. OSILI: Early experiences have been shown to have lasting impact on children. However, we also see that adult children can still be exposed to opportunities to learn about philanthropy.

Another interesting finding from research is that parents can also learn from their children about the importance of giving to particular causes. Some parents and grandparents discuss learning about giving to the environment, sustainable development and other issues through their children and grandchildren.

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: The most surprising finding from our study of American families is that parental giving doesn't seem to have a causal effect on their children's giving. How can that be, when we know from developmental-psychology experiments that adult modeling of giving does increase children's giving?

It could be that in the day-to-day busyness of life, parents are giving, but their children don't "see" it. It could be that only habitual, regular giving of parents makes an impression on children.

So, parents should make sure that their children "see" that their giving is a regular part of their life, and engage the children in conversations about why they (the parents) give.

WSJ: *How do parents make sure philanthropy lessons stick?*

MS. OSILI: Shared experiences can be powerful for reinforcing philanthropic values. Parents can share with their children how to learn about a cause or issue, volunteer together as a family, and discuss a family donation to a given charity. For example, volunteering together at a soup kitchen or building a community garden are philanthropic activities that parents and children can participate in together.

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MS. POWELL: For lessons to stick, you may want to build philanthropy into your family's rhythms in a natural way. You may want to focus more on the overall messages versus the specific issue areas—your kids may not care about the same causes that you do, but philanthropy can emerge as a shared family value. Finally, this isn't an annual conversation—think about embedding philanthropy in the course of everyday life, such as dinner table thought-

starters and reflections, reading books and watching movies where world issues come up, and holiday rituals.

Traps to avoid

WSJ: *What are some mistakes parents can make when teaching philanthropy to children?*

MS. POWELL: We often say that all philanthropy is personal—therefore kids and parents may have different philanthropic passions and priorities. It may backfire to use philanthropy as a way to impose your own values and priorities on your children. Instead, you could consider letting each person discover their own passions and use philanthropy as a way to express these values and passions. Make sure you have age-appropriate expectations and you don't shame your kids for natural reactions.

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: "Pass-through" giving in which you give your child money with the express purpose that they turn around and give that money to a charitable

organization. If you do that, your child has no ownership over what they are doing; she or he is simply doing what you told them to do. And, if you do that, you are teaching your child to give only when other people expect her or him to give---that is, to give in order to avoid shame or receive approbation. A problem is that this teaches a child to give only if the social situation demands it.

WSJ: *How much say should you give your children in choosing the charities the family supports?*

MR. OTTONI-WILHELM: Arrange it so that your child gives money and time out of her or his resources over which they have control—yield the decision-making authority to her or him.

By the same token, the charities you support are your (the parents') decisions, and while any reasonable person would listen to her or his children's opinions and be open to persuasion, in the end this is your decision.

I guess what I am saying is: Don't let your child's philanthropy play out only through the family decisions.

Ms. Dagher is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in New York and host of the Watching Your Wealth podcast. She can be reached at veronica.dagher@wsj.com.

Appeared in the Mar. 20, 2017, print edition as 'How Can You Raise Your Child to Be a Philanthropist?.'

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