

Compassion Classics

by Wendy Hinrichs Sanders

Here are some of my favorite books, many of them already familiar and available in early childhood classrooms. They offer rich opportunities to further explore compassion themes.

- Anaya, Rudolfo. *Roadrunner's Dance* (2000, Hyperion). This Southwestern tale about how the roadrunner was created to save people from the rattlesnake begs for discussion of beliefs and compassion.
- Andersen, Hans Christian. *The Ugly Duckling*. Retold by Jerry Pinckney (1999, Morrow Junior Books). A swan egg gets into the nest of a duck and when hatched, he does not fit in with the others. Not knowing why, he struggles to adapt and then finally is enveloped by a flock of swans heading south. The opportunities for sensing his social and spiritual pain are evident.
- Bailey, Carolyn Sherwin. *Little Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings* (1945, Platt & Munk). The story is also retold by Betty Erickson (2000, Continental Press). This is the story of a rabbit who wants to have something exciting happen. He comes to understand the physical needs for shelter and the spiritual need for love. An owl shows compassion and wisdom.
- Brown, Marcia. *Stone Soup* (1947, Simon & Schuster). The story has been retold in different versions, but the original editions are delightful to own! An impoverished community works together to feed each other.
- Flack, Marjorie. *Ping, the Duck* (2000, Grosset and Dunlap). Ping goes exploring and gets into mischief before he finds his way safely home.
- Lionni, Leo. *Swimmy* (1968, Pantheon). A small fish leads others to collaborate in response to their physical need to protect themselves from larger fish.

Children's Compassion Action Resources

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- Giraffe Project: Find stories of more than 60 children under age 12 who were nominated for sticking their neck out for others: <http://www.giraffe.org>
- Heifer International hosts an array of teaching materials, best serving the primary grades, and opportunities to raise funds to buy an animal fostering a family's economic development: www.heifer.org
- Locks of Love enables children and adults to donate their cut hair to a child in need in the U.S. and Canada suffering from hair loss for any medical reason: www.locksoflove.org/.
- Pennies for Peace. Children in a Wisconsin schoolroom originated the idea of saving pennies to contribute to the building of schools for children in Pakistan and Afghanistan in support of author Greg Mortenson's (*Three Cups of Tea*) Central Asia Institute: <http://www.penniesforpeace.org/>
- Ryan's Well: The foundation of Ryan Hreljac who at 6 years of age raised money to build a well for safe drinking water in Africa. He worked with his teacher to develop teacher materials and invited children's classrooms to join his work: www.ryanswell.ca/

My Research on Children and Compassion

by Wendy Hinrichs Sanders

I heard Ryan Hreljac speak at the United Nations Conference on Sustainability in 2003 in South Africa. His depth of perception, at a mere six years of age, of the needs of children in Africa and his commitment to contribute to the solution was life-changing for me. It challenged so many theories I had read about children's capacities. I wanted to understand capacity and potential within children, specifically related to compassion.

I teach early childhood education at College of the Desert in Palm Desert, California while completing my doctoral degree in intercultural studies from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, CA. Though I conducted my research with school-aged children, their stories and the stories of their parents most often spoke about experiences and relationships during their early childhood years. Consequently, I use the lessons I learned from them to inform my teaching.

I conducted research in 2007-08 with 37 children aged 7-11 years in three states in the United States who were nominated by their children's pastors as being compassionate. I conducted focus groups with boys and girls separately in each community and followed up with interviews with some of the children. I also conducted focus groups with parents and the children's teachers for a total of 64 participants. Of the 37 children, 87% were of European/North American heritage, 11% were Asian, and 3% were Latino.

Finally, 68% of the families described their economic situation as having no trouble buying the things the family needs and capacity to buy special things, 29% identified having just enough, and only 4% reported having a hard time covering expenses. Most significant is the fact that all of those who reported, 92% live in two-parent families.

I learned from these children's insights into how they understand compassion, perceive the needs of others, respond to the need for compassion, and learn about it. Here are some of their insights.

- Compassion is grounded in love and entails a moral order, justice, hope, and integrity.
- Compassion may require sacrifice.
- Compassion exemplars model integrity: They meet the needs of others with dignity and respect.
- Compassion is a response to physical, social, and spiritual needs.
- Children perceive and decide how to act upon the needs of others through an emotional thought process, detecting others' needs through facial expressions and behavior. These emotions trigger creative problem solving.
- Children respond to the needs of their immediate family, their friends, extended family, their country, and their world.
- Compassion is an action word that includes giving, comforting, helping, and praying.
- After acting with compassion, children felt joy, satisfaction, integrity or an alignment of their behavior to their beliefs, hope, and/or a desire to do it again.
- Children learned compassion from parents, spiritual leaders and sacred writings, professionals, peers, and siblings.
- Children learned compassion by imitating others, direct teaching, being inspired by others' work, by receiving compassion themselves, and by being led spiritually or through moral codes. Only one child mentioned a reward for acting with compassion.

Teachers and parents reported trying to instill compassion within their children by modeling and monitoring their children's activities, by coaching and engaging children in acts of compassion, by reflecting on acts performed, by building relationships, by direct teaching, including stories of compassion exemplars. Parents spoke most often about modeling and teachers spoke most often about

engaging children in acts of compassion. Teachers described being supported in their desire to facilitate compassion within children by school policies and curriculum, relationships with coworkers, parents and administrators, their own passion for teaching, training and collegial discussions, and spiritual discernment.