

TRANSCRIPT : WHAT KIDS CAN TEACH ADULTS

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00:05

What can we learn from children about being better humans? They're fiercely loyal to their friends, fast to defend, quick to apologize and swift to forgive. But as a past kindergarten teacher -- always a kindergarten teacher at heart -- I want to share with you a surprising lesson I learned from them about being asked for help.

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I love human behaviors -- how we act differently in different situations and environments -- and these cute five-year-olds with their adorable cheeks and the perfect height to give warm, morning hugs to and almost a competitive love for high fives, were so interesting.

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My first class was called a Mars class. I had 10 students, and each were so full of character. But there was this one kid I'll never forget. Let's call him Sam. Sam behaved like he forgot he was only five. He was so independent. Not only did he know how to tie his own shoelaces, but he knew how to tie other kids' shoelaces too. He also never took home a dirty thermos, because he would clean it after his lunch. And if something happened and he needed a change of clothes, he would do so very quietly and discreetly by himself. He didn't ask for help much himself, but he was the one that his classmates went to for help -- help on things like, can he help them finish their kimchi? Because it's too spicy. He didn't like showing any type of affection to teachers and came across as "the cool kid." If you gave him a good-morning hug, he would roll his eyes and make a funny face as to show discontent, but also stand there and wait if he didn't get his morning hug. He was so smart and reliable that even I would forget that he was only five.

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As a novice teacher, I spent a lot of time observing how more experienced teachers interacted with their students. And I noticed something very peculiar. Oftentimes when kids fall, they don't start crying immediately. They would stand up, puzzled, as if trying to make up their mind -- you know, "What just happened?" "Is this a big enough deal for me to cry? Does this hurt? What's going on?" Usually kids will

be OK until they lock eyes with an adult: one that they trust and know can do something for them. Eyes lock, and then, they burst out in tears. When I noticed this, I so wanted it to happen to me, because to me, that meant that you had earned a kid's trust and had proven that you're capable to help them with anything. You were a hero to them.

02:22

Weeks went by of me just watching other teachers have kids run to them in tears, and I'd watch in jealousy. Oh, was I jealous. I mean, of course I didn't want the kids to fall, but I really wanted that moment of validation that yes, I had earned a kid's trust enough to be the one to help them.

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Then, it finally happened. It was a beautiful day. It was during recess at the indoor playground. The kids were playing and I was getting some things laminated -- because teachers are forever laminating stuff -- in the teacher's room next door. Then I heard a kid yell, "Teacher, teacher, Sam fell down." So I went out to peak, looked around for Sam, and there he was, looking very puzzled, as if he was trying to add double digits. Then he looked at me, our eyes locked, and then it happened. His lower lip started to tremble and his tiny eyes started to fill with tears. Then he burst out in tears running towards me, and it was glorious. I'll never forget that moment. He let me give him a big hug to help him calm down, and it turns out that yes, he did trip over his own two feet so there was no one other than the floor to reprimand. We checked to make sure that he wasn't hurt and he overcame that with not even a bruise.

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It was in that moment, oddly -- it didn't feel like I was there to help Sam, but rather he was giving me this gift, this opportunity to help him. And it's something very weird that I struggle putting down in words. With his vulnerability in coming to me for help as if I could do something about it, you would think that gives me the power, but in that moment, no, it was quite the opposite, and the power shifted even more so to him.

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Being asked for help is a privilege: a gift for you to do something for someone, especially when it's coming from their place of vulnerability.

04:07

With everything I learned from kindergarten, or in "teaching" kindergarten, I went to conquer other things in life. Fast-forward nine years, and I landed in an association for project management professionals in a role that works extensively with volunteers. Working with volunteers is a wonderful experience, but there are some things I wish had a been warned about, like how to set boundaries. It's very easy to fall into the rabbit hole of "because they're volunteers." Late night calls? Yes, because they're volunteers and have day jobs. Business trips that are almost exclusively only on weekends? Yes, because they're volunteers and have day jobs. Not to pat myself on the back, but I got quite good at my job. I was thriving off of the relationships I was building. And the best way I knew how to judge whether I had earned someone's trust was if they would come and ask me for help. I loved it. Every time we did year-end retreats and we talked about what we wanted to be in the next year, my keywords were always "help" or "helpful."

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The problem was that I wasn't being just helpful. Over time, I put more and more pressure on myself to always be busy and to always do a good job. Soon my self-worth became associated with my performance at work, which is basically a recipe for disaster. But don't worry, because I had the best coping mechanism, which was denial, distraction with even more work and drinking -- and lots of it. I was so busy being helpful and independent and being a great Sam that I forgot how to ask for help when I needed it. All I had to do was ask, and if I truly believed that asking for help was a gift, then I should have been doing it more, right?

05:45

Well, we don't always practice what we preach, but about two years ago, I was slapped with a big, fat reminder. To say that I was burned-out at the time was an understatement, but thanks to my coping mechanism, drinking, it looked like I was just having a great time. But one day, just like Sam in the playground, I tripped over my own two feet. I blacked out and woke up with a big cut on my foot from broken pieces of glass, eyes swollen from crying and a voice so hoarse that I'd most likely been wailing. I don't have much recollection of what actually happened, but I remember feeling frustrated, sad and afraid.

06:22

Now you've known me for only about 10 minutes, but you can probably tell that this was really not like me, so when I came to my senses about what had happened, I was in shock. There was no other way of saying it other than that I needed help, both in the sense of I needed some type of therapy help, but also help in getting out of that situation. It was one of the lowest moments of my life, and even in that moment, my mind was running at hyperspeed into problem-solving mode. What do I do with this? If I don't fix this, then I'm even more of a disappointment. If I don't resolve this, then I'm even more of a failure. Those are things that were running through my mind, and it didn't even occur to me that I could ask for help. I was surrounded by so many people who cared for me and wanted to help, but I just couldn't see them. Until finally, my good friend had to literally hold me by my shoulders and force me to ask for help.

07:15

"Can you do this?"

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"No."

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"Do you need help?"

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"Yes."

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"Can I help you?"

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"Yes."

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"Can I get others that love and care for you to help you too?"

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"Yes."

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That was my grown-up version of locking eyes with my teacher. And just like that, as soon as I said, "Yes, you may help me," I felt a tingling of hope and some sort of control coming back.

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And if you think about it, isn't it so weird we spend all of childhood being so good at asking for help and are expected to grow up to be these self-reliant human beings and we get so good at it that we have to be reminded that it's OK to ask for help? Later, that moment helped me realize so many things. I'm always so happy to help others and I love it. Why wouldn't others be willing to help me? And more importantly, why wouldn't I want others to feel the happiness and joy that comes from helping the Sams of the world?

08:09

We all want to be the best Sams in life: to be strong, independent and self-reliant, but we don't always have to be. So let's start asking for help more often, because helping Sams is a privilege and a gift.

08:22

Thank you.