



WALNUT ACRES
Jaguars

MESSAGE FROM THE PRINCIPAL

December 14, 2015

Dear Walnut Acres Parents,

Promoting Caring at School

Caring is our focus during the holiday months of November and December and our effort to teach caring takes many forms. Of course, we try to model caring and encourage children to practice caring for themselves and others throughout the year whether they are collaborating in the classroom or interacting in a less structured setting on the playground or in the MUR. However, the months of November and December, are timely opportunities to emphasize lessons of caring in a very targeted manner. In **November our focus was on gratitude, and this month we shift our perspective to kindness.** Our children are being asked to practice one act of kindness daily during the December months. (You can view my challenge to students in the December student message on our website or [click here](#). Be sure to click the document to enlarge it.)

Why Caring Matters-A Bit of Research

Research suggests ("[Happy](#)" video, PBS, 2014) that about 50% of our happiness level is based on our genetic structure, while another 10% is based on our environmental circumstances, including wealth, health, work, etc. Positive psychology researchers are finding that about 40% of our sense of happiness is based on other factors that we can control! Varying our routines, exercising, experiencing 'flow,' reflecting on things for which we are grateful in our lives, and helping others, all seem to be ways to increase happiness levels according to multinational research studies. (Neurologically, these are activities that increase dopamine in our systems.) Not only do good deeds make us feel better, but according to David Brooks in his *New York Times* article "[Nice Guys Finish First](#)," people who are kind and compassionate are often the most successful.

"We don't teach children to enhance their happiness when we simply enable them to be receivers of kindness. We escalate their feelings of happiness, improve their well-being, reduce bullying, enrich their friendships, and build social skills by teaching them to be givers of kindness. In other words, we want to encourage our children to develop their empathy skills" (from [Roots of Action](#) by Dr. Marilyn Price-Mitchell). We know that the best way to teach any skill is to model it ourselves, and that certainly is true for teaching kindness. There are additional activities we can do at home and school. Below is one suggestion from "Acts of Kindness:

Teaching Children to Care" by Dr. Price-Mitchell:

Promoting Kindness at Home

If you want to spend a little time this holiday promoting kindness, follow the four steps below to help enable children to be givers of kindness. Your efforts will be rewarded!

1. Understand the importance of kindness. The [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation website](#) is a terrific place to start. They have classroom and home activities for children of all ages.

2. Create a kindness project in which children record in a journal (in pictures, words, photos etc.) their acts of kindness around the house and things they do that make them happy.

3. Take time to share items from each person's journal on a regular basis as a family. Share enough so that everyone learns from each other's acts of kindness and begins to understand the types of experiences that bring gratitude to life. Sharing encourages self-reflection.

4. Practice, practice, practice sharing kindnesses. Routinely reflecting on kindnesses as a family takes time, and no one has enough of that, but once it's a family habit, it's easy to share from time to time.

Thank You for Caring About Walnut Acres

I wonder if you are bored by my notes of appreciation for your service and donations to our school? I realize that I repeat myself endlessly, but parents routinely ask me questions that indicate some folks are not aware of the contribution of the PFC, nor our school's dependence on the PFC for many personnel positions, coaching, and materials. So **I would be remiss to write on the topic of caring without thanking you for showing you care about our school through your spirit of volunteerism and contributions to fund services and support for our children!** Check out the [PFC website](#) for details about where PFC funds are expended. Currently, **we have a 68% participation rate in Jaguar Fund. Thank you! If you want to help increase that percentage, consider donating whatever is affordable for your family** to bring us closer to 100% participation! To give, just write a check to PFC and turn it in to the office any time. Or donate online: <http://www.walnutacrespfc.net/fundraisers/ed-fund>. Small amounts do add up. For example, our PFC leadership tells me that if all remaining families gave \$50 each, that could fund a teacher assistant.

A Unique Opportunity for an Act of Kindness

We would like to write a grant to the Safeway Foundation to support our computer lab renovation, but apparently we need a Safeway employee to host our funding request. If anyone reading this message works for Safeway and is willing to put your name on our grant application, please contact me at dowdc@mdusd.org , or call 925-939-1333.

Best Wishes

May you and yours enjoy a memorable holiday and a Happy New Year! As you celebrate with your family, remember that **the greatest gift you can give your child is your time.** Or, to repeat Jesse Jackson's droll comment, "Your children need your presence more than your presents." For a few other valuable holiday insights, check out the message below from our Walnut Acres counselor, Joanne Finn. Joanne is available to anyone who would like to speak to her about parenting challenges.

Dear Families,

I am sending you wishes for peace and gentle joy for your holiday season. It is a beautiful but busy time of year! Here are some tips for being in a soft and joyous space with your children over the coming weeks:

Normal routines can be hard to come by with extended family and friends visiting and many traditions and activities. Psychology Today writer [Kevin D. Arnold, Ph.D.](#), recommends that we try to be **accepting and flexible** as we can: "Replace the routines with the joy of the unexpected...living in the joy of each moment as it unfolds."

Understand and appreciate child enthusiasm that comes with the holidays. Sometimes children will need supports with self-control through limit-setting rather than punishment. But embracing the beautiful childhood holiday energy is key. Dr. Arnold encourages us to send "**accepting messages that validate children as overly-excited (rather than being "bad"), and empathize** with a child's feeling of raw energy."

[Jean Lawrence, with WebMD](#), reminds us that **family changes such as divorce or the loss of a family member can be especially hard during the holidays**. This can be a good time to establish new traditions-perhaps a different time or day for a favorite event. **Keep sleep routines as normal as possible** to help manage difficult feelings more effectively.

Finally, I love guided meditation to bring healing imagery into our bodies and minds. Here's a **holiday meditation** adapted from "Teaching Children Meditation":

Meditation-Tree of light Guide your children to imagine that they are sitting next to a huge tree. The tree has lots of twinkling lights such as the sparkling trees lining Main Street in downtown Walnut Creek, each light is a feeling or present that they can give to someone to make them smile. Ask them to imagine giving that light to a person they know and how happy this makes them feel. You can embellish the story with colors and smells and other senses as they pick a pretending light and perhaps turn it into a star glowing in their hand!

Happy Holiday!
Joanne Finn, busy counselor

See you in 2016!
Colleen Dowd, lucky principal

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