What I’ve Learned From The Children In My Life
by Shaheen Mistry

When I struggle to understand the world, I often remember that all I really need to learn I can learn from children. I can learn from the wonder with which they see the world, from their ability to live completely in any given moment, from the way they can both laugh and cry freely, from their unconditional love, trust and belief.

I often wonder why and how and when we lose those things that we know to be natural and right when we are children. Most of what I have learned about greed, and its opposite charity, I have learned from the children in my life. In the early days of Akanksha, I remember organizing a party for our children at a club. There was much excitement around the games, balloons, chips and ice-cream.

I remember noticing that Parsuram, one of our five-year-olds just stood with his ice-cream, and when I asked why, he said he wanted to take it home to share it with his sister. I told him it would melt. He said that was okay. He really wanted to share it with his sister.

When my daughter Samara was eight, she was preparing for a three-legged race for her school sports day, and came home excited to tell me that her partner was her best friend Parthavi. Parthavi and Samara had been best friends for four years. My reaction was to ask Samara if it made more sense to find a partner who was closer to her height. It’s hard to win, I said, if you both are such different heights. I remember my daughter’s face change, and she looked at me and said, "Mama, what is more important? Winning, or letting my best friend down?"

Earlier this year, I met Raghu. Raghu was afflicted with polio as a child, and lost the use of his legs. He shared that when he was 15 and living in a poverty-stricken rural family, he went to his parents and told them he did not want to be a burden on them and was leaving home. Raghu got onto a train with no money, landed up serving at a Gurdwara, and found his way to Ahmedabad where he now runs a significant part of an NGO working with rural women and handicrafts. Where did you get the strength, I asked. At 15? Being around Raghu you feel calm and at peace. The strength is there inside us, he replied. We just need to know it is there and to look for it.

I think about why Parsuram and Samara and Raghu chose to give and not take. Why a five-year-old wanted to share his ice-cream, why an eight-year-old chose friendship over winning, why a 15-year-old chose to make a life for himself so that he wouldn’t be a
burden on a struggling family. All three seemed to understand what was important. All three seemed to understand that there is peace and happiness that comes from doing something for others. All three taught me a little more about our infinite capacity to think beyond ourselves.

And thinking beyond ourselves causes such important ripples. I remember stopping one hot, dusty, Mumbai afternoon to talk to a little girl on the street. She wanted money, and when I said no, she pointed to a coconut vendor across the street. I remember how she took five full minutes to choose the biggest coconut she could find, and how we sat down on the street with our coconuts as she chatted with me about six-year-old stuff. As we sat there, a man across the street watched us and then crossed over, took out an apple from his bag, and gave it to the little girl. It felt like he had always wanted to do that, but was unsure. He just needed to see someone else do it first.

Four years ago, at the Riverside school in Ahmedabad, a little project called Design for Change was born. The idea was to give children an opportunity to change something about the world that they weren’t happy with. Today, children across 38 countries are designing and executing projects for change. From fighting against child marriage to negotiating with schools to lessen the weight of their schoolbags, 20 million children are thinking beyond themselves.

Last week, in Chile, I walked into a school for the poor and saw children discussing a project that they had just finished: they set up a band in a community to attract people to a space where they had collected stray puppies for adoption. I was amazed to see that desire for change had spread to children on the other side of the world. I just happened to walk into this class.

Five hundred Teach For India fellows are spread across such schools, working relentlessly to put their children on a different life path. I’m seeing increasingly how their impact is spreading. Parents are starting to think differently. Other teachers in the schools are creating new visions for education. Society is beginning to see that teaching is aspirational. And after the two-year Teach For India Fellowship, a growing force of alumni are working across sectors to end educational inequity.

We have an infinite capacity to give. I ask myself often how I can give more, and therefore lead by example for our children. I am reminded that Gandhiji spoke of how there is enough for our need, but not for our greed. How Sr Cyril opened up her school in Kolkata to 300 street girls, telling parents that like she teaches maths, she also teaches compassion.

I imagine a world where we think beyond ourselves, so that the world we create is kinder, more forgiving, more gentle. I wonder how we can make good our default option. I wonder what the world would look like if it was easier to give than take, easier to share than hoard, easier to be good than not. I wonder what the world would look like if we learned more from our children.