

## An Awesome Way to Make Kids Less Self-Absorbed by Vicki Zakrzewski

I've been inspired by recent news stories of children who are working to make a difference in the world, committed to projects much bigger than themselves. There's Malala Yousufzai, the young advocate for girls' education in Pakistan; Craig Kielburger, who advocates for the abolishment of child labor; and Ryan Hreljac, who raises money to build wells in developing countries. The list goes on and on.

But there's a flip side to these stories. Research suggests that some young people in the United States are actually becoming more self-absorbed and less connected to others.

A recent study that examined the empathy levels of almost 14,000 university students between 1979 and 2009 found that students have become dramatically less empathic over the years, particularly since 2000.

In addition, narcissism, which correlates negatively with empathy, is on the rise amongst university-aged students. Narcissists, by definition, are extremely self-focused and tend to see other people in terms of their usefulness rather than true friendship—not exactly a recipe for empathy.

What's more, a 2006 survey showed that 81 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds think getting rich is an important goal, and 64 percent think it's the most important goal. Sadly, only 30 percent believe that helping others in need is important.

While these studies focused on university students and young adults, the findings suggest that somewhere in their earlier development, they weren't cultivating the skills needed to connect with others.

So how can teachers help students avoid the joyless path of self-absorption and instead cultivate a life in which they feel part of something larger than themselves—one of the keys to a meaningful life?

There are, of course, many strong programs that have been designed to help students develop empathy and positive relationships.

But new research suggests another way: awe.

Very little is known about the experience of awe; however, several new studies, many conducted by the GGSC's Dacher Keltner, have shown awe to be a potentially powerful positive emotion that might just help our students develop empathy.

Here's how it works:

When we see a grand vista in nature such as Victoria Falls, or experience an inspiring work of art such as Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" or Michelangelo's Pieta, or ponder the phenomenal inner strength of a great soul like Gandhi who non-violently led India to independence, we often feel two things: 1) a sense of vastness that gives us 2) a new perspective on the world and our place in it. This is awe.

Dacher's lab has found that awe makes us feel very small and like we're in the presence of something greater than ourselves. We also may lose awareness of our "self" and feel more connected to the world around us.

Imagine the potential of this life-changing emotion for students—and, in particular, for our hyper-self-focused teens! Since adolescence is a crucial period for identity-formation, some researchers have suggested that adolescence is a particularly important time to experience awe—it could help them see themselves as deeply connected to the world around them, not the center of it. Inducing the uplifting experience of awe could also be a positive way to keep narcissism in check.

While scientists haven't yet examined if this temporary loss of self-focus directly impacts empathy levels, they do know that awe makes people feel less impatient and more inclined to volunteer their time to help others—strong evidence that it makes them feel more connected and committed to something bigger than themselves.

So can teachers actually create awe-inducing experiences for their students?

Absolutely! In an experiment to see if awe could be elicited, Dacher and his team had one group of university students look at a Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton and another group look down a long hallway. On a follow-up survey, the only difference between the groups was that members of the T-Rex group felt like they were part of a larger whole—a defining feature of awe.

It's probably not too difficult to imagine something that might induce awe in teens, or kids of any age; I've named a few examples above. Stories of exceptional modern-day figures such as Nelson Mandela (consider his ability to forgive) or pictures of the universe such as the birth of a star may be engaging and effective—especially if you find the subject matter to be awe-inspiring. Many teachers already bring content like this into the classroom, and this research on awe validates that approach and suggests it should be tried with more frequency and focus.

Here are two important points to remember if you want to expose your students to awe-filled experiences:

1) Not all students will get it. Dacher has found that some people are more prone to awe than others—usually the ones who are comfortable changing how they see the world. So, if you've got some students who seem immovable, don't fret. If nothing else, they're still learning about "awesome" art, music, nature, and people.

2) Help students process what they've experienced. Awe requires what psychologist Jean Piaget called "accommodation"—the process of changing our mental models to incorporate something to which we've recently been exposed. Discussing and writing about experiences of awe will help students understand and process at a deeper level what they've just felt.

Awe is not a term heard very often in schools, but its potential is vast. Think of the enthusiasm and wonder and joy that awe-filled experiences could bring to our students—experiences that could not only help them out of the narcissistic funk of adolescence, but also put them on a path to a life lived in compassionate connection with others. Awesome!