Teaching Children to Be **Human** in an **Age of Machines**

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The Center for Children's Future, an initiative of Childhood Education International, asked educators, policymakers, and advocates from around the world to share their thoughts about how we can prepare for the futures children will inherit – and create. This article addresses the importance of ensuring that such preparation includes building a foundation of empathy and kindness.

A few years ago, during a morning circle at our school in Ho Chi Minh City, a 7-year-old boy named Minh noticed that a classmate had come to school without breakfast. He said nothing to the teacher. He simply broke his bread roll in half and slid it across the table to his classmate. I have spent nearly two decades in Vietnamese classrooms, first as a teacher and now as a principal, and that small, quiet gesture remains one of the clearest pictures I have of what education is actually for.

Here is what I want to argue. As machines take on more of what we once thought only humans could do, the ability to care for another person is becoming the skill that matters most. Not kindness as a poster on the wall or promoted during a once-a-year assembly, but kindness as something taught deliberately, practiced every day, and taken as seriously as reading. The children in our schools want, more than anything, to be seen, to belong, and to matter to someone. That has not changed. What has changed is how urgently education needs to respond.

The Scarcest Resource in an Automated World

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025[1] asked employers across many industries which skills they valued most. Empathy and active listening made the top ten, and the report identified these as among the skills least likely to be replaced by artificial intelligence. When employers say that understanding another person's feelings will be more economically valuable in 2030 than it is today, they are saying

something about what is becoming rare. Machines are getting cheaper and faster. Genuine human connection is not. The message for schools is simple but uncomfortable: We are working hard to prepare children for a changing world by teaching digital skills, critical thinking, and new languages, but a school that leaves out the careful teaching of empathy and care is only preparing children for part of the future.

Children in Southeast Asia are growing up in one of the fastest-changing digital environments on earth. In Vietnam, phones arrived in family life faster than the wisdom about how to use them well. Teachers at my school report the same pattern described by colleagues across the region: students are comfortable on screens but less sure of themselves face to face, quick to react online but slow to repair a friendship in person. This is not a problem caused by technology. It is a gap in what we are teaching.

Kindness Can Be Taught

The most common objection I hear is that kindness cannot be taught, that children are either born caring or they are not. Years of research say otherwise. The landmark meta analysis by Durlak and colleagues[2] examined 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs involving more than 270,000 students and found that children who took part showed meaningful gains not only in how they treated others but also in their academic results, scoring 11 percentile points higher than peers who did not participate. A follow-up study tracked these students over time and found that the benefits lasted for years, including higher graduation rates and fewer behavioral problems in later life.[3] Teaching children to understand and care for each other did not take time away from learning. It improved learning.

The evidence holds for young children, too, which matters because I believe this work must start early. In a carefully designed study with preschoolers, Flook and

colleagues[4] ran a 12-week kindness program and found that participating children showed greater growth in social skills and earned better marks across several areas of development than children who received no such program. In fact, the children in the comparison group actually became less willing to share over the same period. That last finding is the one I return to most often. Without deliberate teaching, prosocial behavior in young children does not hold steady on its own. We are always shaping how children treat each other. The only real choice is whether we do it with intention.

What Eight Years of Practice Has Taught Us

In 2017, I founded Everyday Kindness[5] in response to a concern shared by many teachers in my city: school environments were becoming more competitive and more anxious, and the children who most needed to feel they belonged were being left behind. The program has since reached more than 35,500 students across 23 countries and was recognized in HundrED's Global Collection 2025.

The design is simple by choice. Rather than adding another subject to an already full timetable, Everyday Kindness works through routines schools already have: morning circles, homeroom periods, family evenings. Over five weeks, students explore the meaning of kindness through stories; carry out acts of care at home, at school, and in their neighborhoods; and share what they have discovered with students in other countries. Vietnamese students have explained the tradition of giving lucky money at Tet to peers in Italy. Indonesian students have described caring for a sick parent through a long night. A student in India shared the story of a girl who offered to clean shoes to pay for her brother's school uniform, and the man who responded by buying the uniform instead. These are not curriculum inventions. They are what comes out when children are given structure and permission to notice the world around them.

Three things have surprised me over these eight years. The first is how fast things can shift when schools commit to daily practice. Schools that build even a short kindness moment into each morning are seeing real changes in classroom atmosphere within weeks, not semesters. In schools that tracked behavior formally, one site documented a 40% drop in suspensions over a single school year. The second surprise is that teachers need permission more than materials. Almost every educator I have worked with already believes kindness matters. Many assumed it was not their job to teach it formally, or worried it would look like time taken from the real curriculum. The most powerful thing a school leader can do is say clearly: this counts, this is planned for, this is part of what we call a good classroom. Culture follows structure. The third surprise is how well the program travels. The stories change and the language changes, but the basic moves of noticing a feeling, putting it into words, choosing how to respond, and making things right when something goes wrong seem to fit children in very different places. Schools in Uganda translated the program into local languages and taught it through village stories about communal care. Schools in South America folded it into existing civic education lessons. Each community brings its own meaning to the same core ideas.

Four Places to Begin

For school leaders and teachers who want to make kindness a genuine part of what they do, experience points to four key actions:

- **Start with young children.** The years before primary school are when children form their first ideas about how other people feel and what they deserve. Habits built at age 5 tend to stay at age 10. Bringing social and emotional practice into early childhood education with the same planning we give to early reading produces results that grow over time.
- **Keep it daily and small.** A kindness event once a term changes very little. A genuine moment of practice every morning changes the feel of a classroom over a semester. Doing it often matters more than doing it in a big way.
- **Let students lead.** The moments that spread through a school are almost never the ones adults plan in advance. When children are trusted to notice what others need and act on it, and when those actions are made visible to the rest of the school, the effect spreads by itself. Children copy each other far more readily than they copy us.
- **Track something,** even simply. What a school pays attention to is what survives. You do not need a formal assessment tool to begin. A short observation note from teachers each week, or one honest question posed to students each term about whether they feel cared for, is enough to show staff that it matters and to tell you whether things are moving in the right direction.

The Child Who Broke His Bread in Half

I do not know what tools the children in my school will use in 2040. No one does. But I am confident about one thing: whatever that world looks like, it will still need people who notice when someone beside them is struggling and then decide to help, not because someone asked them to, but because it has become part of who they are. Minh did not learn to share from a textbook, but he learned it somewhere, from someone who made caring visible and worth doing again. That is what good kindness education does at any scale. It does not create something from nothing. It finds what is already in children, gives it a name, and helps it last.

Preparing children for an uncertain future means more than equipping them with the skills to work alongside machines. It means nurturing the qualities that make that work worth doing. Kindness is not a soft skill at the edges of a serious curriculum. It is the serious curriculum.

Notes:

[1] World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025.* World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

[2] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432.

[3] Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1156-1171.

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[5] Ngo, T. N. (2024). Cultivating everyday kindness: A global education movement from Vietnam. *Childhood Education, 101*(5), 6-13.

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