

Book Review

***UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* (2016), by Michele Borba, New York, NY: Touchstone**

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Can empathy transform lives? Dr. Michelle Borba says yes, and provides step-by-step guidance on how to help develop this attribute in your own child, classroom, or school setting. Michelle Borba is a former classroom teacher and counselor turned international expert on parenting, and the development of positive behaviors in children. Dr. Borba is known for building frameworks to build moral children while providing parents and educators how-to guides to build character and develop empathetic kids. Dr. Borba has written 22 parenting and education books on topics such as: bullying, character development, empathy, moral intelligence, and parenting.

Dr. Borba's latest book, *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*, serves as a roadmap to help adults instill and explicitly teach the ability to be empathetic. Why is this a skill worth talking about? Today's society is filled with individu-

als that demonstrate a "me" first attitude that can be viewed through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Pinterest. These sites offer a platform for people to highlight themselves to many different audiences and has a combined following of billions of individuals. Borba has coined a new term, "selfie syndrome" to describe the condition of branding or promoting oneself to the exclusion of others. This book highlights how to move from self-promotion to the cultivation of empathy.

The supposition of the book is that the "ability to empathize affects our kids' future health, wealth, authentic happiness, relationship satisfaction and ability to bounce back from adversity" (Borba, 2016, p. xiv). It almost sounds like empathy is an elixir in this world of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and what Borba calls "overvalued children." Perhaps Dr. Borba has found a method to help bring back honest discourse and disagreement

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Journal of Character Education, Volume 12(1), 2016, pp. 105–107
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ISSN 1543-1223
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after a political season of unprecedented negativity and nastiness.

Empathy is defined as a trait that allows one the ability to feel with others. Borba goes on to expound that children will develop into better people with an edge to succeed by developing an empathy advantage, the premise that empathy equals success. *Forbes* and *Harvard Business Review* have both acknowledged the advantages of empathy within a business model, so perhaps Dr. Borba is on to something.

Throughout the book Michelle Borba gives guidance on nine essential habits that empathetic children exhibit and how adults can work to develop them in others. These nine behaviors can be broken down into three main categories: morality, perspective, and kindness. The focus of the book is not only on these three foundational principles, but on how to value others in a society that focuses on “me” or “I” instead of “we” or “us.” Emotional intelligence, the capacity to be aware of emotions in oneself or others, is a cornerstone to developing empathy. However, like so many other skills, emotional intelligence can be developed through interactions with others, by focusing on feelings, through expression and connection. So much of what Dr. Borba describes is just that: conscious development through social interaction, discussion of behaviors, role playing appropriate interactions, and learning about these concepts through literature that highlights such topics. This recipe is found throughout the book whether describing how to build an ethical code or develop perspective in order to understand others.

Another thought provoking concept that is highlighted is the development and practice of kindness. Dr. Borba asserts that the demonstration of kindness is necessary in order to help strengthen the empathetic bonds being developed in children. As with any other skill the key to building empathy is practice, practice, practice. As parents and educators, our job is to present the conditions to develop the skills, model and provide opportunities to practice. Although adults state that kindness is an attri-

bute they value, very few provide the resources or time to build these skills in children as they would for music or athletic pursuits. The development of a moral identity, understanding another’s perspective and being kind are all outlined, broken down into teachable steps, and then specific examples for implementation are given, making her formula easily reproducible.

Unselfie provides unique insights for dealing with adults as well. Empathy is lacking in today’s stressed and overburdened “civil” society. Dr. Borba’s prescription for building empathy in children is no less relevant to improve workplace environments and facilitating interpersonal relations. Substituting the word coworker (or self) for child may open one’s eyes to frailties that are glaringly obvious to others in our circle. Of particular interest to adults is the section on moral courage. This skill is significantly lacking in our era of moral equivalency. The challenge to be people who assist others is something adults should instill in children and model more consistently. As the culture requires increased sensitivity to the needs of others, *Unselfie* provides strategies that, if regularly practiced, will result in a more civil society for young and old alike.

Unselfie serves as a quick yet compelling read due to the timeliness of many concepts in the book that can be found in the nightly news or in many of our most prolific newspapers and magazines. Dr. Borba not only talks about how to build empathy, she outlines how we have arrived at such a time to desperately need such a practice to help heal the wounds in our society. Over scheduled and stressed out children, violent behaviors in media and in society, poorly behaving parents and adults, are just a few of the examples that children are bombarded with. The auditory and visual onslaught of negativity has led to an unprecedented period of self-absorption and cruelty among peers in the school system and at home.

As cultures, political parties, and people continue clash, Dr. Borba offers a model that is worth exploring for adults and children alike. Building teams through collaboration, interact-

ing with those that are different, and searching for similarities are all concepts that can be goals for families, schools, and communities. Seeking to understand others and not just to be understood is a model worth following as is

having the moral courage to stand up for those unable to. Dr. Borba provides many lessons throughout worth exploring. Take a look, become an empathy builder and seek to hear, help and heal others.