Caring Across Difference

A 5-year project to help young people develop the skills and motivation to create a more caring and just America.
We are in a time of reckoning in America. How can we mend the fractures that divide our country? And how can we advance justice?

The answers to these questions are complex. But at the heart of the matter is preparing children to create and sustain a different future—to bridge divisions, to value those who are different from them, and to understand and promote justice.

Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, proposes a 5-year project to develop engaging resources and strategies for schools and families that cultivate these key capacities in children and youth. This work will meet an urgent need: parents and other primary caregivers, the main influence on children’s development, rarely have access to useful resources that support children and youth’s capacity to care across difference and to promote justice. And while schools have greater access to programs that can help them develop these capacities in students, these programs are often expensive and hard to implement, and only reach a fairly small fraction of schools. Schools and families need aligned, inexpensive, easily deployable, energizing, and evidence-based strategies and resources that build these key capacities in children and youth.

Our work will include:

- Identifying and mapping the key capacities and skills that help children at different developmental stages between 5 and 18 years old care for those who are different from them and understand and pursue justice. These capacities include *moral motivation*, or a deep commitment to others and the common good; *moral awareness*, including an awareness of injustice in communities and systems; *social-emotional capacities*, such as perspective-taking and self-awareness, especially the capacity to identify one’s biases; and *interpersonal skills*, such as asking questions and listening deeply.
- Developing low-burden, gratifying, and racially- and culturally-attuned activities, strategies, and tools that adults can use in a variety of school and home settings to build these capacities in children and that also create rich opportunities for adults themselves to learn and grow.
- Engaging a diverse array of schools and families nationwide in this work through new and existing programs, creative partnerships, and various innovative communications strategies.
Our work with schools and families

Our school and home-based strategies will be carefully aligned and scaffolded based on children’s developmental stages. For children in the elementary school years, our focus will be primarily on listening, identifying feelings in oneself and others, perspective-taking across difference, and fairness. Our focus with older children will include these skills as well as the capacity to analyze and combat privilege, barriers to equity, and systems that perpetuate racism, misogyny, classism, and other types of injustice. We will also design strategies to help families and schools create democratic processes for making certain decisions that provide children with a lived experience of inclusiveness and fairness.

These resources will build on our current strategies for educators and families, including strategies for promoting empathy and gratitude, listening deeply, expanding children’s “circle of concern,” and assuring that all children are connected to a trusted school adult. In developing new strategies, we will draw not only on research evidence but also on the wisdom of a broad cross-section of parents and caregivers, youth, educators, and practitioners who work with families. Because many worthwhile resources and activities for families and educators never take root because adults or children find them onerous or depleting, we will prioritize strategies that will be energizing for both adults and children. Some of our strategies will take the form of games and activities like bingo and scavenger hunts.

Our strategies will also be designed to create habits and practices that “stick” over time and thus are far more likely to have impact. For example, one of our strategies for elementary school children involves identifying the feelings of characters in books—a practice that can become a reflex. Two of our strategies (see here and here) involve rituals of gratitude that can easily become family and classroom habits. Finally, while we’ll seek to align our home and school-based strategies, we’ll design them so that they also can be used independently by parents/caregivers and educators.

The Caring and Justice Lab

We’ll develop our school and parent resources in part through a new “Caring and Justice Lab,” in which graduate students, faculty, and practitioners around the country will share research and insights on effective school and home-based strategies that develop care across difference and that advance children’s understanding of justice and their commitment to pursuing it. This lab will also function as an idea incubator, providing students and practitioners opportunities to develop engaging school and home-based activities and strategies, to receive feedback, and to pilot new ideas.
Implementation, communications, and dissemination

We will advance our work with schools through new and existing MCC programs, including our national school network and our free workshop series for K – 12 educators. We also hope to advance this work by partnering with a variety of organizations we’ve collaborated with in the past that have access to large school networks, including the Greater Good Science Center and GreatSchools.org. In partnership with leaders in diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools, in Summer 2021 we’ll launch a new program to support leaders in education nationwide in utilizing our strategies and building and implementing a care, equity, and justice framework in their schools. We hope to expand this program in the coming years.

We’ll seek to engage families through their children’s schools and through various organizations that we’ve collaborated with in the past that reach large numbers of parents, including parent education organizations, NBC News Learn, and children’s television channels such as Cartoon Network. In addition, we’ll launch a strategic communications campaign designed to inspire parents and other primary caregivers to prioritize raising children with a commitment to care and justice. As part of this campaign, we’ll develop and test related messages and will broadcast them to a diverse cross-section of parents nationwide through a mix of approaches and channels, including traditional media, digital media, our parent influencer network, partner organizations, and other channels and platforms that reach large numbers of parents, such as Class Dojo.

About Making Caring Common

Making Caring Common is well positioned to undertake this work. Since our founding in 2013, we have equipped parents and educators with tools for cultivating children’s capacity to care for others and to promote justice and we’ve leveraged the power of the media to influence the national conversation about raising and educating caring, ethical children (see, for example, this Washington Post article that has been viewed more than four million times). We’ve also worked with major cultural institutions that send powerful messages to young people, such as college admissions, to elevate the importance of ethical character.

Our team combines the skills needed for the work outlined above, including expertise in the development of moral capacities and social-emotional learning; research, policy, and practice related to education and parenting; and media and communications. We have
reached millions of parents through our research and media work, engaged tens of thousands of educators in our K – 12 projects, and have built a powerful coalition of nearly 400 college admissions leaders nationwide who are committed to underscoring the importance of young people caring for others and the common good.

We welcome feedback, opportunities for collaboration, and suggestions for partnerships that can help us put these ideas into action. Don’t hesitate to reach out to us to learn more, share feedback, or help connect us with new partners and supporters. You can learn more about Making Caring Common at www.makingcaringcommon.org, by signing up for our newsletter, and by following us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Our best wishes,

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