

For children, charity is about more than money

June 17 2019, by Alison Body



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The proportion of people giving money to charity either by donating or via sponsorship saw [a steady decline](#) between 2016 and 2018. Some commentators suggest this is due to a decrease in [donor trust](#) in charities, and [the latest UK giving report](#) found there had been a drop in the number of people that said they believe charities to be trustworthy. This

is likely to have led to this decrease in charitable giving, alongside the fact that charities are asking less, with fewer people saying they were approached to donate money.

For charities who rely on public donations to function, this is of course a cause for concern. And there is a general consensus that charities need to focus on reaching more [people](#), ask well, and cultivate longer-term relationships with donors in order to buck this worrying trend. [But our recent research](#) suggests that rather than just finding "more people to give," engaging children more meaningfully in giving from a young age could be one way to boost future donations.

Children are already very much involved in charitable giving. From dressing up for Children in Need, donning a red nose for Comic Relief or donating food for the harvest festival. But while children may be involved in these fundraising activities from an early age, our findings suggest that they are rarely given the opportunities to meaningfully engage in giving decisions. This includes a lack of discussion about which causes they support, how they support those causes and why.

So given that [research](#) suggests [young children](#)'s social and political orientations start forming in early childhood, to raise children as donors of the future, it makes sense to pay more attention to their giving experiences in the present. Indeed the recent [UK Civil Society Strategy](#) highlighted the importance of involving children in "action for the benefit of others." Plus research suggests that if children are involved in these actions before the age of ten, they are [twice as likely to sustain](#) it throughout their lifetime compared to young people who only start at age 16-18.

Counting on children

Much of the discussions on [charity](#) focuses on how to get more people to

give more money, more frequently. But, as our research shows children take a different view.

They instead focus on acts of everyday kindness, viewing charity as much more than monetary donations. For them it is an embodiment of a set of behaviours, actions and values that are rooted in ideas of [fairness](#) and empathy; the building blocks of social justice and democracy.

Acts of kindness, such as "picking up litter in the park," "holding someone's hand if they are sad" and "helping homeless people," are considered equally charitable to raising money for causes they care about. Causes such as "curing cancer," "helping the elderly with dementia" and "solving climate change." For children, ideas of kindness are often rooted in fairness and [equality](#). As one six-year-old child told us: "If you are not kind to everyone, then you are not kind."

By imposing giving decisions on children, without allowing them to critically engage in the cause they are supporting, there is a risk that charity is seen as a one-off, "transactional process—where giving is closely tied to what a person receives in return. It shifts giving away from its more traditional altruistic, value-based roots.

Our findings, for example, showed that children who hadn't had the opportunity to explore the "why," simply associated giving for Comic Relief with getting a Red Nose, or Children in Need being about dressing up and "wearing Pudsey ears," and were unable to identify why they were giving or to what ends.

Chatting about charity

Engage children in meaningful conversations about giving can help children reflect on their values and the importance of generosity. And forging these connections at a [young age](#) roots their giving in their often

innate socially orientated behaviours.

These conversations can also provide a vital platform from which children can further develop their understanding of social justice, democracy and citizenship. When children are meaningfully engaged in giving decisions, not only do their efforts increase in supporting that cause, but [their propensity to give in the future increases](#).

Children in turn can also encourage kinder more socially orientated behaviours from adults. One [study](#) from the US, for example, indicated that children can play a role in helping their parent's change their attitudes to climate change.

By its very nature charitable giving is rarely non-political and usually linked to wider social, economic or environmental issues. Taking a neutral stance on difficult issues in the classroom, in the community or at home can limit civic participation. Instead, children can be encouraged to be critically curious about these issues.

Philanthropy and charity provide a space for children to explore these issues in a proactive, positive way. If [children](#) are to be recognised as the capable and powerful social actors that they are, and as current citizens operating in a complex world, then it is imperative that they are provided with meaningful and appropriate opportunities to critically explore these ideas.

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