



## FOSTERING EMPATHY IN CHILDREN

Empathy is how we are able to effectively and honestly connect with people. Those who are able to effectively engage with others using empathy are shown to be more effective partners, friends, family members, workers, bosses, and leaders. Empathy matters to everyone.

Below are some ideas about ways to encourage the development of empathy in children

**Address your child's needs.** We know that children who have their own needs met, who aren't worried about whether they are loved or safe, or whose environment is not overly chaotic, have more room in their brains to consider others.

**Be what is called a "mind-minded parent" -- treat your child as an individual with her own mind, and talk with her about the ways that our feelings influence our behavior.** Treat your kid like a person, someone who has the ability to think and reason for themselves, no matter how young. You want to do this with an understanding of capacity, but kids do have the ability to think and understand.

**Model empathy for your kids.** Seize every opportunity you can to demonstrate empathetic feelings towards others. Our kids watch us more than anything else they do. They sometimes know us better than we do. What we do makes a difference. When our children see us being caring or making an effort to consider what someone else is going through, they take note.

*Example: You're watching a TV show with your children and you all see a character do something mean to someone else. You might comment, "Huh. I wonder what that feels like? That might really hurt my feelings if that happened to me." Engage your kids in a discussion about what they think about what you are all seeing.*

**Show your child empathy.** This seems obvious, but it is so helpful. A child feeling what it's like for someone else to really make an attempt to get them helps them realize the value of empathy in relationships. And, it models the behavior as well. Use language to reflect that you are witnessing their feelings, and that those feelings are theirs and not yours.

*Example: "Wow, you're really happy today! Sounds like you had a great day at school. That's so great!"*

*Example: "I can tell that you're really mad at him for breaking your stuff." Even when feelings are hard, and even when your child has done something wrong, it's still important to empathize, as that helps them feel heard and understood, even if they're in trouble.*

**Talk about feelings and emotions with your child.** The more a child is exposed to language about feelings, the more natural it is for them to observe them and pay attention to their own.

**Talk to your child about *your* feelings -- what makes you happy, or sad, or angry, or excited.** Your child can tolerate knowing that mommy or daddy are sad sometimes. You don't want to burden your child with a sense that they are responsible for your feelings. Just start a discussion about what you feel and why you feel this way is helpful for a child to know what's going on with you.

**Talk to them about *their* feelings.** Ask them about what they feel, what they think, how they perceive something. Honor those feelings. Remember, there are no "bad" or "wrong" feelings. Your kids get to feel however they feel, even when it makes you uncomfortable. Encourage discussion about this.



**Label feelings when talking about them.** Again, this helps a child have a greater emotional vocabulary, a greater access to understanding as to what she feels like and what others might feel like. The more practice, the more they will be able to notice it in others.

*Example: "I'm feeling sad today because my friend is sick."*

*Example: "I'm feeling nervous because I have a big job to do at work."*

**Help kids discover what they have in common with others.** Years of scientific study suggest that left on its own, kids (and adults, too) will have an easier time feeling empathy toward people who are more like themselves. So, if you can point out how others who are different actually have similarities with them, this helps in humanizing people who are different, and encourages greater capacity for empathy.

**Teach your kids how to soothe themselves and bounce back from negative emotions.** Again, since we know that one of the main components of empathy is the ability to regulate emotional responses, it will be helpful for them to not be overwhelmed with their feelings when they have them. This is done by empathizing with their experience, giving them permission to feel what they are feeling, and allowing their feelings to be their own, rather than taking them on yourself. Let them know that they can get through their experience, and that you'll be with them as they move through it. This gives them a comforting sense that someone trusts in them, even if they don't know to trust in themselves yet. Eventually this translates into internalizing this trust as they develop their own skills in regulating their emotional state.

*Example: "It's really ok that you're feeling so mad about your sister being rude to you. At some point, you'll need to think about what you'd like to do about it, but for now you're just going to be mad for a little bit. If you want to talk more about that, let me know. I'll be here."*

*Example: "Wow, you're really upset about that. Why don't you take a little time to yourself to calm yourself down? I am sure that you can figure this out, but right now it sounds like you're feeling a little too overwhelmed to think clearly. Let me know if you need any help."*

**Help kids explore other roles and perspectives.** Using TV characters is a great way to encourage imagining different ways of thinking. "So, if that were you, what do you think you'd feel like?" "What would that be like to be..." In fact, just reading books that show different perspectives or ways of thinking can challenge a kid's mind enough to encourage empathy development. Some researchers advocate for more novels in classrooms just to encourage empathy development.

**Point out empathy in others.** When you see an example, just point it out. You don't need to lecture or "drive the point home." Just a simple comment, such as: "Wow, look how she is taking such good care of her friend. She can really tell that her friend is sad." Or, for an older kid, "That's pretty cool -- he totally just noticed how his friend was feeling and took care of it."