

How to Nurture Empathy in Children



We spend a lot of our time living in the space between ourselves and another. If we were to ask our favorite people what they loved about us the most, they would most likely say qualities that describe who we are in relation to others. Our kindness, generosity, open-heartedness, compassion, capacity to be vulnerable are qualities that would be very likely to feature up there at the top of the list. Empathy is the life-giving fuel that umbrellas all of these.

Children are hard-wired for empathy, but like any of our very human qualities, it needs to be gently brought to life. As the important adults in their lives, and their very loving support crew, we are in a prime position to nurture and develop empathy and emotional wisdom in our children.

What is empathy? Empathy is the ability to read what other people might be feeling. It involves understanding what somebody might need or how they might be affected by their experience and responding in a way that is supportive. This doesn't mean necessarily agreeing with someone, but being able to understand their experience from their perspective.

What's all the fuss about? Empathy is the lifeblood of emotional intelligence, which is now widely accepted to be more important to life success and happiness than academic intelligence. Research has found that a child's ability to empathize will affect their future health, wealth, life-satisfaction, and resilience. It drives brave choices in the face of moral risk, defeats bullying, and raises extraordinary leaders. Kids who are more empathic are less likely to bully, and more likely to display positive social behaviors, such as kindness and sharing. They are also less likely to be antisocial or aggressive. Empathy gives children what they need to establish and maintain strong, healthy relationships throughout the course of their lives.

My child is adorable – a heart-stealer actually – but sometimes a little bit selfish. Have we missed the empathy boat? For any of us, having empathy doesn't mean we make use of it all the time. We can all be selfish, self-centered, surly, irritable, or disengaged (ugh those days – we've all had them!). With very young children, expecting them to have empathy is like expecting them to grow feathers. It's just not going to happen. There might be signs of it (empathy, not feathers), and they'll sometimes do things that make your heart gush and glow with pride, but their brains are still working on developing their empathy software. Although very

young children will show the beginning signs of empathy, it really isn't until about age four that children start to become capable of considering things from another person's point of view, interpreting emotion, and offering what's needed. There's a good reason for this, and it's to do with the work they're doing at their particular stage of development.

Up until about the age of four, children have the very important job of learning who they are, and how to be in the world. Their job is to focus on themselves, so they can develop the skills they need to start functioning as independent, healthy little humans. For a while, they'll have a very limited capacity to meet their own needs, and a vast dependence on their team of loving adults to give them what they need when they need it.

Over time, they will start to learn that they exist separately to (but still dependent on) their parents, and that other people might not always feel or think the way they do. This is a process that will continue throughout their lives (hopefully they'll never stop learning) but in their earliest years, it will be all about them. It's just how it has to be for a while.

In the second and third years of their lives, they will start to be more aware of others. This will typically happen during their interactions with others, which is why relationships during those early years are so critical. There will continue to be many moments of frustration and fury when they are caught between knowing what they need, and not being able to influence their environment enough to get it. They're growing and discovering, and they're learning how to be big people. It's no easy gig but they're designed beautifully for the job. It just means they'll have to be a little self-focused for a while – but it will be worth it.

Around the time they become 4-year-olds, their brains start to do something remarkable. These little people who have been focusing on themselves, become aware that other people can have different thoughts and feelings to theirs. They start to develop the ability to 'put themselves in someone else's shoes'. They begin to understand that even though they might think something ('oh it's a birthday cake to share – with icing – I'll just have a teeny lick of all the colors because I love icing and colors so much'), other children might think differently ('I don't want my cake to have licks in the icing'). Signs of this will start to emerge during play, as children start becoming aware of the need to take turns, share, or that newbies to a game might not necessarily understand the rules.

What happens in the brain when children develop empathy? Empathy involves a number of processes that happen in different areas of the brain. These include becoming moved by and aware of emotion in others, understanding what that emotion might be, and being able to show enough self-control to be emotionally present with another person.

Children with greater empathy have been found to have more activity in the anterior insula cortex (the area of the brain critical for emotional awareness – it picks up our physiological sensations and represents them to us as emotions or needs), the amygdala (the area of the brain involved in emotional responses), and the mirror neuron system. (The mirror neuron system helps us to recognize or anticipate someone else's experience, not just because we think it, but because we feel it. It is because of our mirror neurons that we might feel a heaviness in our chest when we witness someone else's sadness, why we screw up our face when we see someone eating a lemon, or why we might wince in pain when somebody takes a bad fall or pricks themselves with a needle.)

The research has also found a reliable and significant link between increased activity in these parts of the brain and greater interpersonal skills.

How to nurture empathy in children.

Children have the hardwiring for compassion and empathy, but as with all tiny seeds, the capacity for empathy will need nurturing and gentle guidance to develop. Here are some ways to do that. There are a quite a few things you can call on to build empathy, but some will likely work better for you and your particular child. Experiment, explore and see what works.

- 1 Encourage their imagination.** Cognitive empathy – the ability to accurately understand and interpret what someone else might be thinking – draws from our imagination and emotional intelligence. When you read stories, watch movies together, or observe people in real life, encourage their curiosity. Ask your kiddos to imagine what someone might be thinking or feeling, or what they might need. What clues come from the person’s voice tone, facial expressions or gestures? This will nurture their ability to take on perspectives that are different to their own and to see things through another’s eyes and recognize emotion in others. Reading emotions can be tricky, and they (we) won’t always get it right. What’s important is that they care enough to notice.
- 2 Acknowledge the emotion in others.** Reading emotions is the first step, then comes the acknowledgement. If our own joy or sadness was met with a stony expression by someone close to us, it would probably leave us feeling a bit empty. Eventually, it would probably do damage. Model acknowledgement with words (“you look sad”, “I feel so excited when you tell me about that”) or actual mimicry (scrunching your face in disgust, hands to face in shock, furrowing of the brow in sadness, smiling in joy).
- 3 Do what I do and guess how I feel.** Play a game where you copy each other’s physical expression (gestures, facial expressions) and then name the emotion. Mimicry is a powerful way we humans come to understand what someone is feeling, and communicate that understanding. Think about how you smile at someone else’s joy, gasp at someone’s shocking experience, frown when someone shares their anger or confusion.
- 4 Let’s pretend.** Any time children play pretend games, they are practicing at life. Through play, children learn what it’s like to “be in someone else’s shoes”. When a child pretends to be a mum or a dad, for example, they have the opportunity to feel what it’s like to be appreciated, adored, ignored, or frustrated. The best part is that they can experiment with emotions as they would with a costume – they can try them on for size, see what works and what doesn’t, then slip out of them when playtime is over.
- 5 Face to face. It’s how the best talk happens.** Being able to read faces and expressions is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. We humans have been beautifully built to connect face to face. It’s why we were designed with faces that smile, wince, nod, and communicate affection, approval, disagreement, anger, fear – all the feels. We have words to do that too, but most of the information we send and receive is done through non-verbal’s such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions. Our children are growing up in a digital world where technology has become an important part of the way they create and maintain their friendships. This can be a great thing, but it’s important that they continue to have face to face conversation, so they can learn how to read what people are feeling, and what they might need.
- 6 Stay with the feeling – it has a good reason for being there.** Some feelings come with spikes. Anger, sadness, jealousy, or frustration can be difficult to be with, but empathy involves feeling what someone is feeling in the moment and it’s impossible to do this while you’re wishing a feeling would go away. Emotions contain so much wisdom. They clue us in

to what we need more of or less of, what we're scared of, hurt by, what feels fragile, what's making us feel vulnerable. Rather than wishing the feeling away, be curious and find the wisdom contained in it. This involves acknowledging what you see ("I can see how sad you are"), being a strong, steady, presence ("it's okay to feel whatever you're feeling") and making it be safe for the words to come. This will model how to respond to difficult emotions, without being swept up by them, "catching them", or shutting them down.

- 7 **Discover the story behind the person.** Encourage your children to be curious about the differences in others. When we understand enough of someone's story, their feelings and behavior start to make sense. It doesn't always mean the behavior is acceptable, but the more we understand, the more we will be to empathize. Understanding someone's story opens us up to the differences between each other in a way that is open-hearted and nurtures acceptance. This isn't about tolerating differences but embracing them and appreciating them.
- 8 **Tune into your own feelings. It's probably what they're feeling too.** Nothing will teach them empathy more than watching it in you. Sit with your child and let his or her feeling connect with you. If you become angry, sad or frustrated, let that be okay – it's likely that your child is feeling something similar. From here, you can say with an open heart, and in a way that your child will believe and be soothed by, "I can see how angry you are right now. You hate it when you have to pack up your toys don't you. I understand. I don't like having to stop when I'm doing something fun either. It's hard isn't it."
- 9 **And if it doesn't make sense.** Sometimes it can be impossible to understand why someone is feeling a particular way, but we can still have empathy. Particularly as our kids get older, there will be things that are so important to them that just don't make any sense to us – the party they *need* to go to in the middle of exam block, their need to wake up during the night to check texts, their desperation not to come on the family holiday to stay with Auntie Lou and Uncle Kev and their six little mini-Kev's on the peanut farm. The point is, we can still show empathy even when we don't really understand exactly what's driving the emotion. Try, "I can see this is important for you. Can you help me understand?"
- 10 **But you don't always need words.** Empathy isn't just about noticing, it's also about responding in a way that helps somebody feel noticed, understood or acknowledged. Sitting quietly with your children and listening as they talk about something that has happened, or how they are feeling, will model an empathic response. By being there, you are communicating that their feelings are important, that they are important, and that you want to understand more about what's happening for them. The more they see it in you, the more familiar and accessible the response will become for them.
- 11 **"If it was a movie ..."** It can be hard for any of us to understand another person's point of view when we've been hurt or disappointed. High emotion can smother empathy, but research has found that a powerful way to re-engage it is with a technique called "stepping out". If your child has been upset by an argument or an incident with someone, encourage him or her to describe that situation as though he or she was watching a movie and it was happening to someone else. "What do you think she might be feeling?" "How would he describe what has happened?" "What do you think she might need to feel better?" "How is it different to what you feel?"

- 12 **Don't worry about the lapses – it's where the learning happens.** Kids will be selfish sometimes – it's just how it is and we would have been too, but when they leave you baffled or shaking your head with their lack of empathy, these are precious opportunities for them to learn. Look through the mess for the lessons that can grow them. And whatever you do, don't take their empathy shortages personally. They're small humans learning to be grown up ones. There's a lot to learn but that's okay, because they have plenty of time to learn it.
- 13 **Hold off from problem-solving – for a moment.** We don't always need to know how to fix the problem to make a difference – that's where the power of empathy lies. Imagine if you had just had an awful argument with a colleague and you came home looking for love and a shoulder from your partner, but his or her very quick response was, 'well you should just call and put it right.' Perhaps this is brilliant advice, but it also has enormous potential to communicate how easily the problem can be fixed, and that your reaction is an 'over-reaction'. Instead of an instant fix-it, listen as your child talks about what has happened, how they have interpreted it, what it means for them and how they are feeling. Acknowledge and validate this and if you need to, help them to label their emotions. With the connection strong, and your child trusting that you now understand enough of what's going on, he or she is more likely to be open to your advice. They are likely to feel more empowered and supported and with this, more able to deal with the situation on their own or more open to your advice.
- 14 **Talk to them as though it's who they are.** It's a subtle difference, but research has found that talking about pro-social qualities as a part of who they are ("you're a great helper"), rather than something they do ("you're really helpful"), will help to foster those qualities. Children want to do good things, but even more than that, they want to be good people. Sometimes, rather than talking about their kind or thoughtful behavior ("what you did was really kind/ thoughtful"), try putting the focus on them as kind or thoughtful people, ("I love that you are kind/ thoughtful"). Help them to develop their identity as kind, compassionate, empathic humans by talking to them as though they already have these qualities.
- 15 **How are you the same?** Feelings of connection and understanding are increased when we expand the shared space between us. It's often easy to see the differences, but encourage them to look through this to the similarities. This might not always be easy, particularly with people they feel no connection or similarity with, but we're all human and we share human feelings, human strengths, and human flaws. The similarities will be there.
- 16 **Expand their emotional literacy.** We experience the world and other people through language. The greater their capacity to put word to their feelings, the greater their capacity to notice those feelings in others. Help your child to find the right words to describe what they're feeling. If they are feeling sad, they might also be feeling scared, jealous, rejected, overlooked, frightened. If they are feeling angry they might be feeling frustrated, annoyed, exhausted, anxious. If they are feeling happy they might be feeling playful, joyful, or excited. Each time you help them name an emotion, they'll have a new word for when they see something similar in other people.
- 17 **When have you felt that way?** Encourage them to think about times they might have had a similar experience, or felt a similar way to somebody on the tv, in a movie, in a story or in real life. Anything that sparks conversation about emotion, whether it's theirs or others, will nurture the empathic spark inside them.

- 18 **Or in fantasy ...** Children learn through play, and as the important person in their lives, you're one of their favorite people to play with. Expand their emotional vocabulary by taking turns to think of an emotion and a time each of you felt it. Try for some of the emotions that can be tricky to feel and own, but which are as much a part of being human as owning a pulse – jealousy, fear, anger, spite, confusion, anxiety.
- 19 **A teeny tweak in conversation.** Harvard's, "Making Caring Common" report found that four out of five teens believe their parents care more about achievement than caring. Even though kindness is at the top of the list for most parents, children don't seem to be getting that message. This is an easy one to turn around. Rather than, "It's really important to me that you get good grades," or "I just want you to be happy," try, "It's really important to me that you work hard, are kind, and that you are happy," or, "I just want you to be happy and kind."
- 20 **Encourage self-control.** Our capacity to read what other people might be feeling, and respond appropriately can easily be overwhelmed by anger, shame, jealousy or fear. All of those feelings are completely okay to be there, but they can cause havoc and hurt when they get out of control. Make way for the emotion to be there, but at the same time, encourage self-control. "I can see your angry right now, and I want to understand what's happening for you, but it's hard for me to listen to you when you're yelling at me." "Can you sit beside me, breathe, and talk to me?" "I want to understand."
- 21 **And finally ...**

Empathy gives kids what they need to be change makers – in relationships, families, the schoolyard, and the world. It nurtures the human connections and the space between ourselves and others in which we live, grow and learn. Empathy isn't the touchy-feely add-on to their success and growth and well-being, it's central to it.

Children want to do the right thing and they want to learn. Their minds are beautifully open, even when they might not be open to exactly what we're saying at exactly the time we're saying it. Kindness, empathy, and compassion are something that grow, little by little – and all the 'littles count – the little moments, the little chats, the little gestures. Who we raise our children to be, rather than what they do will ready them for success, happiness, and courage to be the people the world wants to know, love, employ and seek out.