



Empathy And Child Development

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Empathy: can be defined as the identification of, and understanding of, someone else's situation and feelings. Empathy is being able to look at a situation from someone else's perspective.

Empathy is not **magically** feeling someone else's emotions; rather, it is the ability to recognize that we are all human, and therefore even though I am not currently experiencing what you are experiencing, I can identify with it because I have these feelings too. Empathy can be of both sorrowful feelings and joyful feelings.

When do children start developing empathy? Many people believe that we are born with the ability to have empathy, but that it develops over time. Children as young as two or three years old are able to express empathy.

Why is empathy important? Empathy is a precursor to compassion. Someone who is compassionate is generous, charitable, humane and giving of self. These are all qualities that contribute to not just a healthy person but to a healthy community and society.

What are some indicators of empathy, sympathy and compassion?

Some indicators are sharing, cooperation, helping, and comforting. These are all skills that are related to social competence and that help children make and keep friends and do better in school. A lack of empathy may play out in bullying or teasing behaviors.

How to teach empathy:

- 1. Role model** through speech and action. How adults interact with each other (and children!) is an important teaching tool. Verbalize empathetic feelings and actions, so children can start to understand what this is. For example, you could say to another adult (but in hearing range of your child), "Would you like me to do that for you? You seem so tired tonight and I'd be glad to help."
- 2. Positive reinforcement** in real time (i.e. "I really appreciate it when you help her.")
- 3. Verbal cueing**--not just that the behavior/action is desirable but that being the kind of person that does this behavior is desirable. Convey that being a caring, kind person is a positive attribute of someone's character. (i.e. "I really appreciate it when you help her. You are a kind person.")
- 4. Practice by using books.** Many stories allow you to explore empathy by asking, "How do you think this character feels?" How would you feel if you were in this situation?

What do you do if you don't feel it? Sometimes a person may feel unable to be empathetic because they haven't been in a similar situation. One way to demonstrate empathy is to ASK! For example, you could say to your child, "I never had a best friend who moved away? What does it feel like?"