

Teaching Children Empathy

Empathy can be defined as the ability to be aware of, perceive, understand, and be sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another and to express that understanding through a supportive response. The ability to feel another's distress and then, rather than focus on how it affects us, focus on the other person, is what motivates caring and compassionate behaviors. I am sure that we all want our children to grow up to be empathic, caring and compassionate people. For some children this comes more naturally than to others. Having two children myself, I can speak from experience. It may have something to do with the female/male difference or second child/first child issue, but I'm not sure. All I can tell you is that if I got hurt, for example stubbed my toe and cried out, "Ow!" my daughter from a very early age would react immediately and run to get me an ice pack. Conversely, when my son was very young, he would continue doing what he was doing and fail to even take notice of my experience. Some children need to be taught more than others about the value of empathy, how to recognize their own and others' feelings, and how to show understanding. Some may need to be specifically taught that if someone gets hurt, their first response should be to ask, "Are you okay?" This shows the other person that you are aware of their distress and that you are sensitive to their feelings. While initially they may ask the question without really listening to the answer, eventually, they will understand that when someone is having difficulty, the empathic response is to focus on that person and see if there is anything you can do to help. While developing empathy comes easier to some children than to others, all children can benefit from increasing their ability to understand and be sensitive to others.

To commemorate the anniversary of 9/11, my children's school had them each do a Random Act of Kindness. My children and their friends chose to bake cookies and make cards for our local fire department. It was a great opportunity to explain to them that our firefighters are volunteers and how on 9/11 firefighters put others before themselves by running into the buildings that people were running out of. Learning about these acts of selflessness really surprised the children and I think made quite an impact on them. Although many times our acts of kindness go without a tangible reward, my children and their friends were fortunate enough to not only hear the thanks and appreciation of the firefighters, but also to get a private tour of the fire station! I am hoping that what my children took away from that experience is that it always feels good to do something nice for others and sometimes, they even do something nice for you in return.

As part of our social-emotional learning program here at the Jackson school, our teachers this year are utilizing a curriculum entitled Connected and Respected. They will focus on fostering a number of social-emotional skills including accepting differences and recognizing/exploring feelings, two important elements in the development of empathy. Of course, they also

incorporate the teaching of these skills throughout other content areas as well. At home there are also ways to reinforce these skills and to help your child become more empathic. The following suggestions were taken from the book, Teaching Children Empathy, The Social Emotion, by Tonia Caselman, PhD.:

- 1) Be responsive to your child's needs. This is empathy in action!
- 2) If your child's misbehavior affects another person, ask how s/he thinks the behavior made the other person feel.
- 3) Help your child develop a large vocabulary of feelings words. Exaggerate your own use of feelings words.
- 4) Read children's books to your child that incorporates messages of kindness, brotherhood/sisterhood, and connection to others (see below for suggestions).
- 5) Encourage your child to "read" others' feelings. You can practice this by looking at pictures in books and magazines and playing a game where you take turns telling how you think the person feels.
- 6) If your child has hurt another child, ask your child to consider how her behavior has hurt the other. Instead of focusing on the misbehavior per se, focus on the other person's feelings.
- 7) Point out similarities between your child and other children. (Research shows that empathy increases when one perceives the other as similar to self.)
- 8) As a family, practice doing Random Acts of Kindness for others. Talk about how good it feels to do nice things for others.
- 9) Encourage your child to show an interest in others' activities and feelings.
- 10) If your child tells you of another child who is ill or having some sort of difficult circumstance, take a few moments and help your child make some sort of Get Well/Sympathy/Encouragement card for the other child.

Following is a list of some recommended children's books for empathy development. The grade levels are just approximations. If you would like additional suggestions, please let me know.

Children's Books to Develop Empathy

- Blume, Judy. Blubber. New York: Dell Yearling, 2004. (Grades 4-6).
- Bower, Gary. Ivy's Icicle. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002. (grades K-4).
- Gantos, Jack. Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key. New York: Harper Trophy, 2002 (grades 4-8).
- Hallinan, P.K. Heartprints. Nashville: Ideals Children's Books, 1999. (grades preschool-2).
- Havill, Juanita. Jamaica's Blue Marker. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. (grades preschool-2).
- Keats, Jack Ezra. Louie. New York: Puffin Books, 1975. (grades preschool-1).
- McCloud, Carol. Have You Filled a Bucket Today? Northville, MI: Ferne Press, 2006. (grades preschool-5)
- Michels, Tilde. Come Here, Little Hedgehog. Nashville: Abington Press, 1988. (grades preschool-3).
- Moss, Peggy. Say Something. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2008. (Grades K-5).
- Munsch, Robert. Ribbon Rescue. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1999. (grades preschool-3).
- Pfister, Marcus. Rainbow Fish. New York:North-South Books, 1992. (grades preschool-3).
- Robinson, Barbara. The Best School Year Ever. New York:Harper Trophy, 2005. (grades 3-6).
- Zolotow, Charlotte. I Know a Lady. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1984. (grades preschool-3).

If we work together, we can help our children become more empathic, caring and compassionate human beings.

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