

Teaching Empathy

Holiday time is a perfect time to start reflecting upon empathy and the importance of developing empathy in our children. Empathy, by definition, is the ability to understand what others feel and express that understanding in a caring way. There is a developmental progression of empathy, starting as early as the first weeks of life. For example, research has shown that as precursors to empathy, infants cry in response to the cries of other infants. Empathy continues to grow into the toddler years. I remember when my two year old began to bring toys to another child who looked distressed at a park. At three years old, I remember one of my children feeling sorry for a friend in his pre-school class that missed a party because his friend went home early due to an injury. This year, when I took my four year old daughter with me to my son's check up at the doctor's office, she cried more when she watched him get a shot than he did! Although empathy seems to emerge naturally (for some more than others), we can not assume that it will continue to grow to its full potential if we do nothing to support it. So, how do we nourish this treasured trait? Experts agree that empathy can be learned the same way children learn multiplication tables – through active teaching, experience, practice, and repetition.

Just like the development of academic skills, helping children develop empathy is an ongoing process and can't be taught in a few days or weeks. Children need lots of learning opportunities and practice. This year, I decided to infuse empathy training into all school social skills groups at Seaman. Empathy training involves development in three main categories. This includes a cognitive domain (ability to take different perspectives), an affective domain (ability to match another's emotions), and a behavioral domain (displays of concern). If your child is not involved in one of my social skills groups, I am excited to tell you that this year, aspects of empathy training will also be infused into all K-5 classrooms at Seaman, through a new piloted social emotional program entitled, "Connected and Respected". Other school wide initiatives will also foster empathic skills, such as modeling and reinforcing empathic behaviors, as well as specific books and focus topics chosen through our current "Making Meaning" Reading Program. Besides the training they will get through school, there are several things you can do at home to support empathy development.

To start at the most basic step, help your child to develop a strong "feelings vocabulary". Then, move on to teach them how to recognize those feelings in others. Point out the "code" for reading emotions, such as facial expressions and body language. Use T.V. and literature to point out these signals and cues. While reading books, draw attention to the characters and their feelings. For example you can say, "Froggy is excited about going to play in the snow, isn't he?" Aside from T.V. and literature, use real life situations to point out other people's emotions. For example, during a family get together, you might say, "Your cousin is upset because Aunt Kim won't buy him the toy he wants." After you have provided enough modeling, give your child opportunities to answer questions about other people's emotions. For example, you can ask, "How do you think Franklin feels right now?" Have them imagine how it would feel to "stand in Franklin's shoes". Take it one step further and have your child brainstorm a thoughtful

response to make Franklin feel better. On a daily basis, make sure you act as a good role model and reinforce your child's empathic behaviors such as sharing, supporting, comforting, and helping.

There are optimal times to teach empathy, and times where empathy training may be disastrous. For example, when children are dealing with difficult feelings of their own, it may be hard for them to think about the feelings of others. If they are angry, frustrated, or sad, they will be trying to process their own feelings and therefore it will be difficult for them to be empathic towards others. During these situations, it's best to wait until a child has calmed down and resolved their own feelings before discussing empathy for others. However, when your child is upset, it is a good opportunity for you to model empathy and be empathic towards their feelings. This way, they experience empathy first-hand through example.

Together, we must educate our children emotionally as well as academically. We can broaden our children's hearts as well as their minds. Empathy fosters kindness, peace, acceptance, and tolerance for others. It brings a sense of social connection to others and therefore is basic to all healthy relationships. If we work together, we can focus on developing empathic children that grow up to be caring, compassionate, and emotionally intelligent adults. The following is a list of suggestions adapted from Dr. Tonia Caselman's book, "Teaching Children Empathy, The Social Emotion":

- Be responsive to your child's needs. This is empathy in action!
- If your child's misbehavior affects another person, ask how he/she thinks the behavior made the other person feel.
- Help your child develop a large vocabulary of feelings words. Exaggerate your own use of feelings words.
- Read children's books to your child that incorporates messages of kindness, brotherhood/sisterhood, and connection to others. (See the "Suggested Reading Material for Empathy Development".)
- 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.
- If your child has hurt another child, ask your child to consider how his/her behavior has hurt the other. Instead of focusing on the misbehavior per se, focus on the other person's feelings.
- Point out similarities between your child and other children. (Research shows that empathy increases when one perceives the other as similar to self.)
- As a family, practice doing Random Acts of Kindness for others. Talk about how good it feels to do nice things for others.
- Encourage your child to show an interest in others' activities and feelings.
- 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.

Suggested Reading Material for Empathy Development

Havill, J. (1995). Jamaica's Blue Marker. Illustrated by Anne Sibley O'Brien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Jamaica is happy that Russell is moving. He marks up her picture, throws sand at her, and chases the other children at recess. When she realizes how Russell must feel about moving, she gives him one of her markers to use at his new school.

Havill, J. (1986). Jamaica's Find. Illustrated by Anne Sibley O'Brien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Jamaica finds a stuffed dog in the park and takes it home. After thinking about the toy, she brings it to the lost and found. At the end of the story, Jamaica finds the owner and reunites the child with the toy.

Hughes, S. (1997). Alfie and the Birthday Surprise. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

When Smoky the cat dies, Bob, Alfie's neighbor, is very sad. Alfie suggests that his family give Bob a birthday party with a new cat as a gift.

Fox, M. (1985). Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge. Illustrated by Julie Vivas. Brooklyn, NY: Kane Miller.

Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge lives next door to an "old people's home." His favorite person to visit at the home is Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper, who Wilfred learns has lost her memory. Wilfred asks the others at the home, "What's a memory?" Based on the answers he receives, he develops a basket of objects which he hopes will help Nancy's memory.

Joosse, B. M. (1988). Better with Two. Illustrated by Catherine Stock. New York: HarperCollins.

Laura tries to cheer up her neighbor, Mrs. Brady, when the woman's dog dies. In time, Laura succeeds in cheering up her neighbor by sharing herself.

Suggested Reading Materials for Empathy Development (Cont'd)

Keats, E.J. (1975). Louie. New York: Greenwillow.

Susie and Roberto put on a neighborhood puppet show. Louie, whom Susie and Roberto have never heard speak, falls in love with Gussie, the puppet, and speaks to it during the performance. The story ends with Louie being given the puppet.

Knox-Wagner, E. (1982). My Grandpa Retired Today. Illustrated by Charles Robinson. Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.

As Margey helps her grandfather clean up his barber shop for the last time, she empathizes with his separation from the shop as he retires.

McCourt, L. (1997). Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Best Night Out with Dad. Illustrated by Bert Dodson. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

Danny is excited about seeing the circus again with his father. While waiting in line, Danny describes the circus to a boy who has never been to the circus at all. When it turns out that the boy and his father are unable to afford the price of admission, Danny decides to give the boy and his father his tickets. Danny and his father forego the circus and "shoot some hoops" for the evening.

McCourt, L. (1997). Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Goodness Gorillas. Illustrated by Pat Grant Porter. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

A group of students form a club to do good deeds. When the class bully's dog is killed, the club reaches out to him and he ends up joining the club too.

McCourt, L. (1997). Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Never-Forgotten Doll. Illustrated by May O'Keefe Young. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications

Ellie learns that her 88 year-old babysitter still remembers with sadness the loss of a prized china doll. Using her own money, Ellie purchases an antique doll and gives it to her babysitter for her birthday.

Suggested Reading Materials for Empathy Development (Cont'd)

McCourt, L. (1998). Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Braids Girl. Illustrated by Tim Ladwig. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.

Izzy goes with her Grandpa Mike to help out at the homeless shelter. While there, she decides to try to help a little girl. Although Izzy brings the young girl clothes and toys, Izzy realizes that the girl is still not happy. Finally, Izzy discovers that the best way to give happiness is to give the gift of friendship.

Muldoon, K. M. (1989). Princess Pooh. Illustrated by Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.

Patty is jealous of the attention her older, wheelchair-bound sister, Penny, receives. After trying the wheelchair herself, Patty understands the difficulties her sister experiences.

Rahaman, V. (1997). Read for Me, Mama. Illustrated by Lori McElrath-Eslick. Boyds Mills.

Joseph loves books. He brings home two each week, but his mother never reads to him. When Joseph discovers that his mother can not read, he supports her in her efforts to learn to read.

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