

Empathy

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by John Hoffman

Empathy is the ability to identify with another person's feelings, to be able to understand and care about how they feel, and, in turn, to want to help them with their problems.

Empathy helps us to understand and get along with people and to find ways to solve the problems of individuals and society in general. It also forms the foundation for prosocial behaviour—behaviour that is positive, helpful, and intended to promote friendship and acceptance of others. Empathy also makes undesirable social behaviour such as fighting, bullying, being insensitive, and arguing less likely.

How do children develop empathy?

First and foremost, children need to experience the empathy of others, particularly of their parents. Therefore, your efforts to understand and show sympathy for your children's feelings, to meet their needs and comfort them are the most important lessons your child can ever have in developing their own capacity for empathy.

Obviously, no parent can ever be perfectly empathic with children. Sometimes we are impatient or tired and have trouble being sympathetic. But it's important that children experience empathy from us more often than not. If children do not experience empathy at home, it will be hard for them to learn it from other experiences.

Children also learn empathy from social experience, for example:

- Playing with and talking to friends gives children experience in reading people's reactions, judging their emotions, and seeing what happens when people are not treated with empathy.
- Friendship and loving relationships with family members give children experience in understanding others and caring about how they feel.
- Spending time with younger children and helping to care for them gives children practice in reading and understanding the needs of others.
- Caring for and developing attachments to pets helps children develop feelings of empathy.

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- Participating in charitable work—helping out at community charitable functions or taking part in family decisions about charitable donations—gives children experience in different ways of helping others and also shows them the value of helping others.
- Having conversations in which parents explain the needs and feelings of other people helps children develop the ability to understand the perspective of others.

Developing the capacity for empathy will not only help children become good citizens, it will also increase their ability to connect with people and maintain strong friendships and loving relationships. It will also increase their chances of being treated with empathy by others.