

Giving Children Opportunities to Help Others

by John Hoffman

One important way children learn to understand other people is by parents and other adults sharing their experience and knowledge. This is especially important when helping children learn about empathy, which is the ability to put yourself in another person's place, care about how they feel, and want to help them.

Here are some ways to give children opportunities to see and show empathy.

Let them see you showing empathy for others. When your children observe you helping other people or showing sympathy for their problems or feelings, they learn what empathy looks like in action. Children learn the same lesson when you talk about why you volunteer with a community group or donate money to certain charities.

Share your sympathetic observations about other people. Obviously children will learn from seeing how you treat other people with empathy. They will learn even more if you let them know what you were thinking. For example, if you watched *Home Alone* with your children, you might say, something like, "I know it was supposed to be a funny movie, but felt sorry for Kevin when he was left all alone by his family."

Give your child opportunities to help other people. Whether it is a family sponsorship of a refugee child, making contributions to a charitable cause, helping Grandma do some chores, or helping to serve meals at a charity dinner, the experience of helping teaches children about the various needs that people have and the importance of actions that convey empathy.

"Catch" them being good. When your children show empathy for another person, praise them for it. "It was nice to see you trying to help your brother feel better when he fell and scraped his knee."