

## Helping Children Develop the Ability to See Other Perspectives

*by John Hoffman*

Empathy—the ability to put yourself in another person’s place, care about how they feel, and want to help them—is one of the most important social skills of all. Children are born with the capacity for empathy, but it’s a skill that develops gradually. Here are some ways to help.

**Use the word empathy.** This may seem obvious, but most people don’t use the word empathy in conversations all that often. Explain to your children what empathy means, why it’s important, and use the word sometimes in appropriate situations. “You treated your sister with empathy today when you tried to comfort her.” It’s important to use the words that name ideas and values we want children to adopt.

**Talk about your own feelings.** Children pick up on how we feel from our facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. But we can increase their understanding of emotions by talking about our own feelings sometimes. “I’m sad today because I found out that a good friend of mine is really sick.”

**Talk about other people’s feelings.** The core of empathy is being able to put yourself in another person’s shoes. So, it can be helpful to sometimes share your observations about how other people are feeling. If a baby is crying in the grocery store line, you might say, “Oh that poor baby is really sad!” Or, if you notice your partner is in a bad mood because of a tough day at work you might say, “Your Mom is really tired and upset because she had a hard day at work. Let’s try to be extra nice to her tonight.”

**Be empathetic with your child.** This is the single most important thing parents can do to help children develop empathy. Children start learning empathy from the moment of birth. The more we empathize with their pains, emotions, and worries the more they will learn what empathy is and how to show it to others. Sometimes adults are tempted to dismiss what children feel by telling them they shouldn’t be upset, or that they shouldn’t make such a fuss. But what children need to hear from us more often than not is that we understand what they’re feeling. The more children experience our empathy, the more likely they are to treat others with empathy.