

Using Stories to Help Children Develop Empathy

by John Hoffman

Stories have always been used to teach life lessons as well as entertain. Reading and talking about stories can teach children valuable lessons about empathy.

There are many stories in which the main character's empathy for someone is a critical part of the story. Two classic examples are the well-known tales *Beauty and the Beast* and *Charlotte's Web*. But there are many, many others. Children will learn to some extent just from hearing stories like these. They can learn even more if we point out the examples of empathy in stories.

Here is a short list of books and films that teach empathy.

The English Roses, Madonna, grades 1–3. A story about friendship, envy, and the importance of compassion.

Masai and I, Virginia Kroll, grades K–3. A young American girl learns about understanding others by imagining what it would like to be a member of the Masai tribe.

Max Talks To Me, Claire Buchwald, grades K–3. A boy learns to understand and meet the needs of his dog.

Molly's Pilgrim, ages 7 and up. This 1985 film, about a school class learning to accept an immigrant girl from Russia, is based on the book by Barbara Cohen.

Nanny McPhee, ages 7 and up. In this well-known film, the behaviour of a rebellious group of brothers and sisters is transformed by a new nanny who helps them come to terms with the loss of their mother. It is based on the *Collected Tales of Nurse Matilda* by Christianna Brand.

Puddles on the Floor, Lorena Estep, grades 2–6. A story about an abandoned dog who eventually finds a home with a loving family.

Storm Boy, Paul Owen Lewis, grades K–3. A chief's son is tossed from his canoe in a storm and welcomed by the people of an unfamiliar village. It is based on stories from the Haida and Tlingit peoples.

This is just a tiny sampling of the many stories in literature and film that can help children learn about empathy. Ask your child's teacher or your local children's librarian or bookstore owner for more suggestions.