



By Megan Richardson

Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another person's feelings and emotions. Empathy is an important characteristic, and it's never too early to teach your child how to be caring and understanding toward others. The best ways to teach children empathy include setting an example for them and using interactive activities.

Magazine Activity

1. Write down one emotion on a blank note card. Include emotions like happy, sad, angry and embarrassed.
2. Lay out the cards in front of your child and go over what each emotion means.
3. Flip through a magazine or picture book with your child. Have him guess which emotion the person is feeling based on the facial expression.
4. Brainstorm with your child on ways you can make someone feel better if the person is experiencing a negative emotion.

Pet Activity

1. 1 Point out a dog or cat's actions at different times during the day. It can be your own family pet or a random pet at the park.
2. 2 Ask your child to notice what the animal is doing. Maybe a dog is wagging its tail or a cat is hissing.
3. 3 Discuss with your child what those actions mean and what it says about how they are feeling.
4. 4 Brainstorm ways to make animals happy when they are upset. Examples of this would be petting the animal or buying it a new toy.

By Michael Brent

Helping a child develop empathy is an ongoing process. Unlike such attributes as intelligence and physical attractiveness, the ability to be empathetic is not genetically determined, and children need to be taught this important trait. While children learn empathy largely through the example of their parents, there are some fun, enlightening activities that can enhance a child's empathy for others.

1. Teaching Empathy

Like any other skill a child can develop, be it learning a musical instrument or developing proficiency at a sport, empathy is something that requires constant practice in order to ensure these skills continue to develop and do not atrophy. The seeds of empathy can be planted early in a child's life via empathetic behavior demonstrated by parents, and a child's demonstrations of empathy must be reinforced continually as the child grows from infancy through to adolescence.

2. Name That Mood: Feelings Flashcards

For young children, the first step in the development of empathy is the recognition of facial expressions and body language. One way to help young children develop empathy is to create a set of feelings flashcards with pictures (possibly cut from magazines) of people demonstrating different emotions such as "happy," "sad" or "mad." Children can then be asked to "name that mood" by guessing what a person is feeling by observing his facial expression.

3. End the Story

A teacher can arrange students into small groups and have them read the short paragraph-long story "The Shy Girl" (which can be found on the Education World website, in the Resources section). The story is incomplete, and after each group has read the story together, ideas should be discussed regarding how they would like the story to end. Ask a volunteer from each group to read her group's ending to the assigned story. Students can then vote for their favorite ending, and discuss why they chose the endings they did.

4. The Talking Stick

For children, one of the most difficult parts of empathy is remaining open to points of view they may not agree with. Native American tribes traditionally use a talking stick as a way to facilitate communication in meetings, with whoever holds the stick allowed to speak while everyone else listens respectfully. When another person is given the stick, he can then present his opinion, until everyone has had a turn to speak. In a classroom setting, students can use the talking stick during a group discussion, forcing them to listen to and hopefully respect the viewpoints of others.

By Wendy M

Empathy, being able to understand how someone else feels in a given situation, is a valuable life skill. Empathy strengthens relationships by building understanding between the parties. Beyond that, Paul Coleman, Psy.D., says the ability to empathize also helps children perform better in school. But empathy does not necessarily come naturally. Sometimes children need a little help to develop it.

1. I Know Just How You Feel

Write emotions on the top line of standard 3"-by-5" index cards. Distribute one card to each child. Then ask each to write about a time when he felt that way. When all of the children have finished, collect the cards. Read the stories aloud and ask the children to identify which emotion each story represents. If the group is old enough and has a supportive culture, you may wish to have children take turns drawing cards at random to read out, instead of reading them yourself.

2. Sculpt a Feeling

Knowing how to "read" how someone else is feeling constitutes a key skill for empathy. Help children develop this skill with a simple sculpting game. Write emotions on slips of paper and put them in a bucket. Have one child volunteer to be the first "statue." This child does not move. Choose a "sculptor" from the remaining children. The sculptor will draw an emotion from the bucket and "sculpt" the "statue" to display that emotion. The other children will then

try to guess what emotion the statue displays. The statue then becomes the sculptor and the game continues.

3. Zoom

Wilderdom.com includes Zoom in a list of icebreaker activities. Listening well and seeing things from another person's perspective, which are crucial for empathy, feature prominently in this game. Randomly distribute a set of pictures that tell a story. Children must not let anyone else see their pictures. The goal is for the children to recreate the story, in order, by listening to the others to figure out where their parts of the story fit.

4. That Takes Me Back

Music is a powerful tool for expressing emotions. Use it to help build empathy with this game that is similar to a musical version of Red Light, Green Light. Line children up side by side (as if for a race) and play clips of music. If a child can identify a time when something happened that made him feel the same way the music did, he may take a step forward. Call on a child or two to identify the feeling in the music. (It is OK if children identify different emotions for the same music clip.) If the setting is emotionally safe, you may ask the child to share the story, but it is not necessary.