Developing Empathy

Empathy is being aware of another person's feelings and being sensitive to those feelings. Empathy is important for children to learn, but teaching it to them is difficult. That is because young children are naturally very self-centered. They have a difficult time seeing a situation from another person's point of view.

Toddlers often do not know when they have hurt someone emotionally. They have not yet developed the cognitive ability to understand that people feel differently about certain things. They are still learning to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

Preschool-aged children begin to learn empathy from what they see and experience, mostly in their own lives. They may still have a difficult time seeing things from someone else's point of view and understanding why someone may not feel the same as they do. But they are beginning to take cues from the way they are treated by others and from the way their parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and friends treat others.

Empathy will greatly influence the way your child will eventually interact with others and your child's relationships. If your child feels loved and cared for, it will show in the way he or she treats others.
Tips for teaching empathy
Empathy is an important skill. These tips will help you help your child to develop empathy.

Set a good example
Much of what children learn about empathy comes from what they see and experience in their own lives. You are your child’s best and most important teacher.

- No matter how many words you say to young children, what you do is what they will notice the most.
- In teaching empathy, model it yourself. For example, don’t laugh at anyone’s misfortune, no matter how minor. If you see a child drop her ice cream cone, you might say to your child, “That’s too bad. That made her very sad.”
- Try to be caring and considerate in your relationships. Your child is watching.

Talk about feelings and emotions with your child
- Talk about the things your child does that make you happy.
- Talk about things your child can do to make others happy.
- Talk about things that make you sad or that make your child sad.

Label feelings when talking about them
- Label your feelings when you have them. For example, “I’m sad my plant died.”
- Acknowledge when your child has feelings, and label those feelings. For example, “Are you sad because Billy couldn’t come over to play? It’s all right to be sad.” Then, work on what to do instead.

Show your child empathy
Showing your child empathy demonstrates you can understand what he or she is feeling and when he or she is suffering something inside.

- For example, “I can see that you are really happy about finding the toy you lost.” Or, “I know you are disappointed that it is raining and we can’t go to the playground.”
- Show empathy even when your child does something you don’t approve of. But don’t condone the bad behavior. For example, “I know you are angry that your brother broke your toy, but you should not have hit him.”
Point out empathy in others

You can help your child learn about empathy by pointing out when other people or fictional characters do something that shows empathy.

- Find and explain to your child examples of empathy in television programs, movies, or real-life situations.
- When you see an example, simply point it out. You don’t need to lecture. For example, “Isn’t that interesting how that person understands the other person is feeling bad and tries to help?”
- Quality children’s television shows, such as Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood and Sesame Street, have many examples of characters showing empathy.

Point out empathy in others

There are several signs to look for that suggest your child is beginning to learn empathy.

- Your child will begin to talk about feelings in general and what he or she is feeling. For example, “Mommy, I’m sad. I need a hug.”
- Your child will begin to show signs of caring about others. For example, “Are you OK, Daddy?”
- Your child will show care and concern while playing. For example, while pretend-playing, your child may start “taking care of“ a favorite stuffed animal or pretend to be concerned about how the stuffed animal feels.
- Your child may give you a favorite toy or a blanket to try to comfort you if you are upset.
- Your child will begin to decide how others are feeling or how something will make someone else feel.
- Praise your child when you see him or her showing empathy.

Be patient and consistent

Developing empathy is not done overnight. It takes many lessons taught over and over.

- Be consistent in the example you set, what you say about other people, and in pointing out empathy shown by others.
- Above all, be patient. Don’t quit trying to help your child become compassionate, understanding, and sensitive to the feelings of others.