

Teaching Children Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand how another person is feeling and to respond sensitively to those feelings. Empathetic people are typically able to understand the perspective of others and respect and value their views, whether they agree with them or not. Having empathy helps build relationships and can possibly prevent bullying.

Research suggests that students are less empathetic today than they were 30 years ago. Some experts view technology as the culprit. Socializing through a screen does not provide the opportunity to process facial expressions in others or to tune into their emotions. Other experts suggest that social and emotional development are not emphasized in order to focus on academic achievement. These societal changes make it even more important to actively support building your child's empathy skills.

Demonstrate empathy towards your children

When children's emotional needs are met, they are more likely to be empathetic. Soothing your children during times of distress increases the likelihood that they will soothe others. When children feel valued,



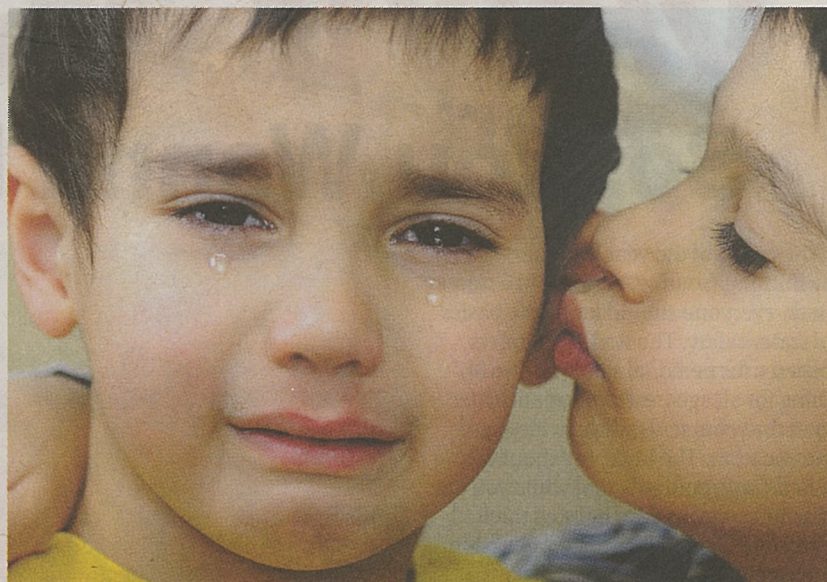
they are more likely to value others. Labeling and validating your children's emotions supports their ability to both handle them and to show care for others.

Demonstrate empathy towards others

Children notice how we treat others. Demonstrating empathy or pointing out situations in which empathy should be offered will help children build their own skill. When watching shows or movies with your children, talk about how the characters might be feeling. "How do you think she feels when..." "How would you feel if..."

Teach feeling identification

The ability to name their own emotions makes children better able to identify and empathize with the



emotions of others. Name emotions you are feeling throughout your day; name your child's feelings for them, and point out feelings you think others may be experiencing. "I felt disappointed when they didn't have what I wanted at the store." "You seem sad that you did not do well on your math test." "It looks like those children won't play with that little girl. How do you think that makes her feel?"

Reconvene after conflicts

During a conflict, emotions are high, and it is usually not the best time to process what everyone is feeling. When all parties are calm, validate emotions and discuss feelings. "You seemed angry when John took your car. It's okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit. How do you think that made him feel? Next time, what could you do instead of hitting?"

Practice

Like other skills in life, empathy is one that benefits from repetition. Ask your children about issues at school, and brainstorm what peers might be feeling. Discuss if there are ways to

help. Hold meetings as a family, and demonstrate respect for the ideas and feelings shared.

Rethink "I'm sorry"

We often coach our children to end a conflict by simply saying "I'm sorry." While showing remorse is important, simply saying "I'm sorry" does not build empathy. Instead of having your children apologize and move on, consider focusing on the other person's feelings and how to help them feel better. "Look at Maria's face. She looks very sad that you pushed her. Let's see if she is okay and if you can help her feel better. Maybe you can get her a Band Aid."

Graziella Simonetti is a parent educator for EAC Network's Long Island Parenting Institute and works as an early childhood social worker for the New York City Department of Education. She holds an advanced certificate in parent education from Adelphi University and is a NYSPEP credentialed parenting educator. Simonetti is a former kindergarten teacher.

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