



A WAY OF BEING WITH CHILDREN

Supporting Empathy Development

Tips to Promote Child Well-Being and Resilience

What is Empathy?

Empathy creates the foundation of all connection to others. It is a skill that develops over the life-span and involves a number of different processes which are shaped by genetics, personality, observation, learning, reinforcement, and life experiences. There are lots of complex processes that need to happen simultaneously for this skill to be effective, so providing children with support and encouragement to execute this skill is crucial to developing and strengthening it.

Definition:

The American Psychological Association defines empathy as understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.



The Importance of Empathy:

Empathy says: "I want you to know you're not alone. And I want to understand how this feels to you."

It is the foundation of all connection to others and it's a crucial element in developing our emotional intelligence. It's the tie to feeling understood and validated; to having effective communication and strong, secure relationships. Without empathy, we may feel misunderstood by and disconnected from others. Empathy allows us to connect with those around us, to consider their feelings and way of being, and to accept differences. It allows us to feel valued and important, as well as demonstrate this to others. It also helps us become self-aware and able to speak up for what we need.



Implementing Empathy Requires:

1. Understanding that we are all independent
2. Recognizing that others think/feel differently
3. The ability to identify and name emotions
4. Considering a situation and imagining oneself experiencing it
5. Imagining a way to respond to another person that is appropriate and considerate given their experience and feelings



Age Appropriate Expectations are Important

Empathy Develops in Milestones Across the Lifespan:

- Empathy is not innate
- Brain development/maturity play a part in empathy
- Children are naturally more egocentric when younger
- A secure attachment is the foundation for the ability to connect to others
- Children need additional guidance and support at times to implement this skill
- Life will requires us to constantly challenge our perspective and ways of thinking; the more we practice this skill, the stronger our empathy response will be



12 Tips to Support Empathy Development

1. Patience is crucial!

Empathy is a complex process - patience, acceptance, encouragement and guidance are important to creating a supportive environment for the child to practice this skill.

2. Model empathy.

Demonstrating empathy toward the child/children you parent/care for/teach is incredibly important to learning.

3. Reflect Feelings.

This allows you to demonstrate understanding as well as assist the child in developing an emotional vocabulary.

4. Discuss feelings, situations and experiences.

Challenge existing thoughts by having open discussions about thoughts and feelings to highlight the ways we all interpret things differently.

5. Ask open-ended questions.

This encourages participation and communication as well as aids children in recognizing thoughts and feelings throughout the day.

6. Teach coping skills.

Studies have shown that children who are better at regulating their own negative emotions tend to show greater empathic concern for others.

7. Use visuals for emotion identification.

This is a helpful way to connect the emotion with the physical expression of it and helps children to recognize the feelings of others.

8. Practice mindfulness and meditation .

This is a fantastic way to reflect on one's own feelings or even wish another well during a practice like a loving-kindness (metta) meditation.

9. Use empathic language.

Be mindful of using labels to describe oneself or others, as this tends to convey judgement rather than empathy and understanding.

10. Guide nonverbal cues.

Helping a child notice mannerisms, expressions and tonal inflections can assist them in having a better understanding of the feelings others are experiencing.

11. Find common ground.

According to studies, helping children identify similarities between themselves and others, boosts their sense of connection and increases empathy.

12. Encourage problem-solving.

Helping a child identify and problem-solve a situation can aid them in finding solutions and motivating them to act from a place of empathy.



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