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PARENTING RESOURCE

How to Help Your Child Develop Empathy

By Claire Lerner and Rebecca Parlakian

Yes, you can help your child be more empathetic! Try these practical tips to help infants and toddlers develop empathy and understand that others have different thoughts and feelings than they do.



Empathy is the ability to imagine how someone else is feeling in a particular situation and respond with care. This is a very complex skill to develop. Being able to empathize with another person means that a child:

- Understands that he is a separate individual, his own person;
- Understands that others can have different thoughts and feelings than he has;
- Recognizes the common feelings that most people experience—happiness, surprise, anger, disappointment, sadness, etc.;
- Is able to look at a particular situation (such as watching a peer saying good-bye to a parent at child care) and imagine how he—and therefore his friend—

might feel in this moment; and

- Can imagine what response might be appropriate or comforting in that particular situation—such as offering his friend a favorite toy or teddy bear to comfort her.

Milestones in Empathy

Understanding and showing empathy is the result of many social-emotional skills that are developing in the first years of life. Some especially important milestones include:

1. Establishing a secure, strong, loving relationship with you is one of the first milestones. Feeling accepted and understood by you helps your child learn how to accept and understand others as he grows.
2. **Around 6 months old**, babies start using social referencing. This is when a baby will look to a parent or other loved one to gauge his or her reaction to a person or situation. For example, a 7-month-old looks carefully at her father as he greets a visitor to their home to see if this new person is good and safe. The parent's response to the visitor influences how the baby responds. (This is why parents are encouraged to be upbeat and reassuring—not anxiously hover—when saying good-bye to children at child care. It sends the message that “this is a good place” and “you will be okay.”) Social referencing, or being sensitive to a parent's reaction in new situations, helps the babies understand the world and the people around them.
3. **Between 18 and 24 months old**, toddlers will be developing a theory of mind. This is when a toddler first realizes that, just as he has his own thoughts, feelings and goals, others have their own thoughts and ideas, and these may be different from his.
4. **Between 18 and 24 months**, toddlers will start recognizing one's self in a mirror. This signals that a child has a firm understanding of himself as a separate person.

What You Can Do To Nurture Empathy in Your Toddler

Empathize with your child. For example, “Are you feeling scared of that dog? He is a nice dog but he is barking really loud. That can be scary. I will hold you until he walks by.”

Talk about others' feelings. For example, “Kayla is feeling sad because you took her toy car. Please give Kayla back her car and then you choose another one to play with.”

Suggest how children can show empathy. For example, “Let's get Jason some ice for his boo-boo.”

Read stories about feelings. Some suggestions include:

- *I Am Happy: A Touch and Feel Book of Feelings*

- *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
- *How Are You Peeling* by Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers
- *Feelings* by Alike
- *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr
- *Baby Happy Baby Sad* by Leslie Patricelli
- *Baby Faces* by DK Publishing
- *When I Am/Cuando Estoy* by Gladys Rosa-Mendoza

Be a role model. When you have strong, respectful relationships and interact with others in a kind and caring way, your child learns from your example.

Use “I” messages. This type of communication models the importance of self-awareness: I don’t like it when you hit me. It hurts.

Validate your child’s difficult emotions. Sometimes when our child is sad, angry, or disappointed, we rush to try and fix it right away, to make the feelings go away because we want to protect him from any pain. However, these feelings are part of life and ones that children need to learn to cope with. In fact, labeling and validating difficult feelings actually helps children learn to handle them: You are really mad that I turned off the TV. I understand. You love watching your animal show. It’s okay to feel mad. When you are done being mad you can choose to help me make a yummy lunch or play in the kitchen while mommy makes our sandwiches. This type of approach also helps children learn to empathize with others who are experiencing difficult feelings.

Use pretend play. Talk with older toddlers about feelings and empathy as you play. For example, you might have your child’s stuffed hippo say that he does not want to take turns with his friend, the stuffed pony. Then ask your child: How do you think pony feels? What should we tell this silly hippo?

Think through the use of “I’m sorry.” We often insist that our toddlers say “I’m sorry” as a way for them to take responsibility for their actions. But many toddlers don’t fully understand what these words mean. While it may feel “right” for them to say “I’m sorry”, it doesn’t necessarily help toddlers learn empathy. A more meaningful approach can be to help children focus on the other person’s feelings: Chandra, look at Sierra—she’s very sad. She’s crying. She’s rubbing her arm where you pushed her. Let’s see if she is okay. This helps children make the connection between the action (shoving) and the reaction (a friend who is sad and crying).

Be patient. Developing empathy takes time. Your child probably won’t be a perfectly empathetic being by age three. (There are some teenagers and even adults who haven’t mastered this skill completely either!) In fact, a big and very normal part of being a toddler is focusing on me, mine, and I. Remember, empathy is a complex skill and will continue to develop across your child’s life.

(<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2125-the-emotional-life-of-the-toddler-by-alicia-lieberman>)



Emotional Life of the Toddler
An in-depth examination of toddlers' emotional development

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