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# Learning Empathy in Preschool Years

## *How can my child be caring and loving to others?*

*"Smile at each other, smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children, smile at each other—it doesn't matter who it is—and that will help you to grow up in greater love for each other."*

– Mother Teresa

By Teacher Aaron

A 3-year-old child is playing a game of tag on the playground. She trips and falls down and then begins to cry. A neighboring peer comes by and he says "are you ok? I'll get you a band-aid so you feel better."

I saw this last week at school and it reminded me how truly wonderful it is to see children show signs of an emerging empathetic personality. We all want our children to be caring, loving individuals who have empathy for others.

Empathy truly is the skill of taking the perspective of others and thinking about it before acting. Children who have this skill are usually very aware of their own emotions and are aware that others experience the same emotions they do. A child who is empathetic knows the appropriate response to an emotion, whether that emotion is seen by adults as positive (e.g. excited) or negative (e.g. angry). Empathetic responses are actions responding to caring feelings of another individual.

Before the preschool years, we know from observation and well-known developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, that toddlers are primarily egocentric. "This is my toy." "I want to go here right now." "That is mine." The egocentricity is so evident throughout infancy because children are discovering themselves and are showing signs of expressing their needs. The primary use of emerging language skills is quite often to express need, so it's no wonder toddlers are all about themselves.

The preschool years, however, mark the move from

egocentricity to empathy—the potential for it anyway. Children become more helpful and caring during these years, although it can be a struggle. She is still wondering whether to be egocentric or helpful to others in problem situations.

There are many reasons why we want her to understand that empathy is important. In particular, empathy is vital for children to form healthy long-lasting friendships. Healthy peer relationships give a child not only a sense of safety and security, but a higher self-esteem. Also, a child who shows signs of empathy typically does well to prevent bullying throughout the school years. In fact, children who self-report empathic feelings for victims of bullies have been shown to be 64% more likely to play a role as a defender or to intervene when bullying occurs. Research also shows that if she develops good empathy skills now, she'll have better emotional regulation during her school years. One study even indicated that scores of young children on an empathy measure were positively correlated with scores on standardized tests of reading, spelling, and math at ages 10 and 11.

So how can we help? As adults, we can promote empathy by:

- (1) helping children to recognize their own feelings, and
- (2) helping children to recognize the feelings of others.

Ask questions like "where in your body do you feel angry, sad, happy?" Recognize and verbally label if they have clenched teeth, red faces, big smiles, tears,

*“People will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget  
how you made them feel.”*

*-Bonnie Jean Wasmund*

open bodies, or closed bodies. “You are smiling, this means you are happy.” Then help them see the difference. “Now you are jumping up and down, so you’re excited. Earlier you were clenching your fists, when you were angry.” Then, provide children with opportunities to talk about their feelings. “When that coffee shop closed early, we couldn’t get our hot chocolate. That made me feel frustrated. How did that make you feel?”

Help children to recognize the feelings of others by observation. “Susie is frowning because she is upset.” Or “Jason is running around outside because he is ecstatic.” Use both observations of both facial and body expressions. Even in story books, help children to recognize the emotions of the characters in the story.

Then help children develop appropriate problem-solving skills. Show them exactly how to solve problems. As parents, we can do this by recognizing the problem (“she took the streamer out of your hand”). Discuss the choices available (I can get help from an adult, I can get more streamers, or I can ask for them back). Then, talk about what the consequence is of each choice (If I ask for them back, she may say no). When they choose, ask them if it was a good choice or not and support positive instances of problem solving whenever you see it.

Make sure that apologies are genuine. Research and good evidence-based practice says that forcing apologies leads to shame and guilt instead of genuine remorse. Instead, promote the sharing of feelings. “He is very sad, I wonder what would help him feel better? What could we say or do? You could say you’re sorry or give him a hug. Maybe he wants a drink of water. Let’s ask him.” This helps children understand that when others are hurt or even when they are feeling happy, that our actions can have a positive effect.

Finally, good empathy skills develop in healthy, warm, safe environments. Research shows that children raised by warm, caring parents (versus those who aren’t) show higher levels of empathy. However, be sure to make rules and expectations clear.

Be supportive, but be consistent. This makes it easier for children to understand and follow rules. “I cannot let you use your body that way. This is how we use our bodies.” Or “when you gave her the pitcher of water when she asked for it, that was a good way to eat at the table.” Most importantly, be a good role model for your child. Children model adult behavior, so reflect on what kind of emotional responses you want your child to have. Good research shows that parents who have positive responses to problem situations have children who develop positive behaviors during school years.

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