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Lesson:

Helping Your Child Develop

# Empathy



## BACKGROUND

**Empathy** is a critical component in developing emotional intelligence. We develop this skill as we become aware of other people's feelings, needs, and concerns. Empathy is important because it helps us to understand how others are feeling and how our actions might impact them. It's important for building relationships with friends and family. Experts are concerned that too much screen time may be causing a decline in empathy because we are replacing the role of real live friends with virtual ones (Swanbrow, 2010).

## PREPARATION

- Read through and understand all the definitions
- Find a picture book to share with your child that has illustrations that show emotions. Some ideas for books you could use are, [When Sophie Gets Angry](#), [Glad Monster](#), [Sad Monster](#), [The Way I Feel](#), and the [The Feelings Book](#).
- Think about how you have modeled empathy for your child.

## OBJECTIVE

- Help your child understand what empathy is and why it is important.
- Encourage your child to think about a situation from someone else's point of view and try to understand how they might be feeling.
- Discuss with your child why face to face interactions are important and why they need to limit their screen time.

## LESSON

**Healthy Relationships** with those who we care about can bring a great deal of joy into our lives. These types of relationships are built on empathy. They require our effort and time. When we have true empathy for someone, we try to "put ourselves in their shoes." This is important because it helps us to be a good friend or teammate, and it helps us to understand more about the people and the world around us.

## DISCUSSION:

Empathy is often confused with **sympathy**; however, they are not the same thing. Sympathy focuses on offering comfort even when you are not feeling the same emotion as the individual with whom you are interacting. Empathy goes beyond comfort and focuses on having a personal understanding and sharing emotions with someone.

Being empathetic consist of two parts. The first part is feeling the way someone else does even though you are not in the same situation, and the second part is understanding someone else's **perspective**. Listening carefully to what someone is saying, watching and reading people's **body language**, and asking questions can help us understand what they might be feeling. We need to make sure we are balancing our screen time and not allowing it to take the place of our time with family and friends so we have opportunities to practice and develop empathy.

- Discuss what empathy is and why it's important to have empathy.
- Discuss how we can develop empathy.
- Discuss what can lead to a lack of empathy.
- Discuss some suggestions for balancing screen time with face-to-face interaction.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CHILD

- What does it mean to have empathy?
- Is having sympathy the same thing as having empathy?
- Have you ever felt sad or happy with a friend just because they were sad or happy?
- What can you do to develop empathy for others?
- Does too much screen time affect our ability to have empathy for others? Why?

## ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR OLDER KIDS

- Discuss how social media might lead to a lack of empathy and how to balance that.
- Discuss current events with your children, and ask them how they think the people in the story might be feeling.
- Discuss situations your teenager might see in TV shows with fictional characters. Ask them if they relate to a particular person in the show and why.

## QUESTIONS FOR OLDER KIDS

- Do you think pornographic images affect our ability to feel empathy?
- How would you feel if someone said something about you that wasn't true?
- Why will empathy help us have healthier relationships?

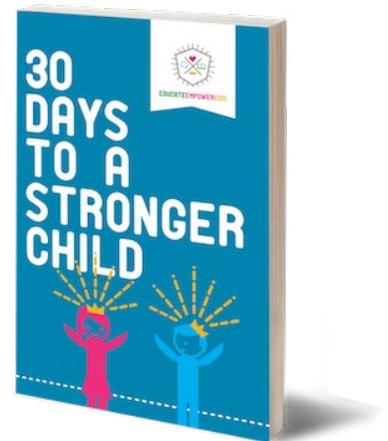
## ACTIVITY

### Younger Children:

1. A simple activity to do with younger children is to read a picture book and look at the pictures together. Talk with your child about what the character in the book is doing that might tell you how they are feeling. For example, questions such as, "Why do you think the character is smiling?" or "What made them feel happy?" or "Would you feel happy if that happened to you?" can help children learn to discern what a character might be feeling.

- A. After reading your selected book, here are a few questions to ask your child from the [\*30 Days to a Stronger Child\*](#) book to help them reflect on a time in their own life when someone was empathetic toward them.

- I. Can you think of a time when someone helped you when you were feeling a strong emotion?
- II. How did the help you received make you feel about that person?
- III. How can you help others when you see they are having a hard time with their emotions?



2. Play the "What if" game with your child? Ask your child "What if" questions, and then have them tell you how they think someone would feel and what they could do to help.
  - A. What if you saw someone get pushed down on the playground? How do you think they would feel? What could you do to help them?
  - B. What if your friend couldn't find their favorite toy? How do you think they would feel? What could you do to help them?

- C. What if your friend's family pet died? How do you think they would feel? What could you do to help them?
- D. What if your friend won their soccer championship? How do you think they would feel? How could you share in their emotion with them?

**Older Children:**

1. A great activity to help your teen look beyond their own needs and put themselves in another person's position is to find opportunities for them to volunteer with others who are less fortunate than them. Look in your own community for volunteer opportunities that would expose your child to people from different backgrounds.

## FOLLOW UP FOR PARENTS

- As a parent, remember one of the most important things you can do to help your children develop empathy for others is to meet their emotional needs. Make sure you are comforting your kids when they are upset and sad. Talk with them about their emotions, and encourage them to share with you how they are feeling.
  - It is important for parents to set aside time and give their children their uninterrupted attention. This lets them know they are a priority. This does not have to be expensive or excessive. It can be as simple as a thirty minute walk around the neighborhood where you listen to how their day was.
  - Parents can also work on not trivializing their children's feelings. For example, when a parent notices their teen is upset, they should ask them about it and not just chalk it up to them being a teenager. Even if you are having a hard time relating to your child or you feel like they don't want to talk to you, continue to try to reach out to them and let them know you care and are there for them. You never know when they may come around and be ready to share and talk.
- Parents can also help their children develop empathy by working with them to develop self control and teaching them to manage their emotions. Helping children learn to manage negative feelings can help them to be more empathetic to those who are different than them. The following are two ways parents can teach this to their children.
  - Teach children three steps to manage their emotions. This should be practiced

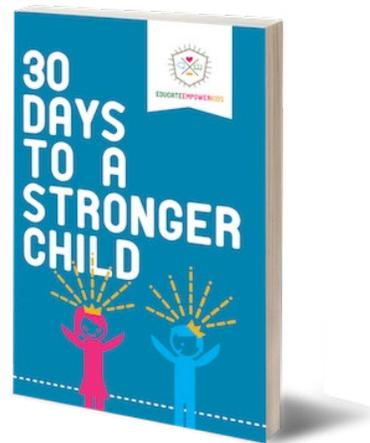
when they are calm. However, when you notice them getting overwhelmed, you can remind them to use it.

1. stop
  2. take a deep breath through the nose and exhale through the mouth
  3. count to five
- Teach them how to resolve conflict by role playing different situations that might occur in their life. For example, a friend gossiping about them or a disagreement with a teacher or parent. Practice with your child how to approach someone when they disagree with them. Go over with your child the importance of listening empathetically to the other person's point of view.
  - Have them practice listening when someone is speaking and not interrupting, even if they disagree. Then practice with them clarifying with the other person what they are feeling and what they heard the other person saying. Finally, brainstorm with them some ideas as to how they think they could resolve the conflict that would be respectful to all parties involved.

## RELATED DISCUSSIONS

All of these topics can be found in [\*30 Days to a Stronger Child\*](#).

- Kindness
- Sympathy
- Friendship
- Respect
- Community
- Gratitude
- Love
- Empathy



## RELATED ARTICLES, LESSONS, AND BOOKS

- [5 Ways to Teach Children Empathy](#)
- [Lesson: Kindness: Online, Face to Face, and Everywhere](#)
- [Teach More Than “Charity” This Season, Teach Your Kids Empathy!](#)
- [Noah’s New Phone: A Story About Using Technology For Good](#)



## GLOSSARY

**Empathy** - Choosing to experience another’s feelings, thoughts, or attitudes as your own.

**Healthy Relationships** - A relationship where both individuals are invested, care about each other, and there is reciprocity of emotions, actions, and thoughts.

**Sympathy** - An expression of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune.

**Perspective** - A particular attitude or way of looking at something.

**Body Language** - The process of communicating nonverbally through conscious or unconscious gestures and movements.

## CITATIONS

Swanbrow, D. (2010, May 27). Empathy: College students don’t have as much as they used to. Retrieved from <https://news.umich.edu/empathy-college-students-don-t-have-as-much-as-they-used-to/>