

Building Empathy in Children and Teens

— Tip Sheet

YOUNG CHILDREN

TWEEN AND TEENS

TIPS FOR PARENTS

How can we help young people develop affective empathy? The best approach depends on how old they are. Children begin to understand empathy as toddlers, but at this stage they are so completely “in the moment” that the best approach is to watch out for situations where we can model and talk about empathy with them. When a child does something or witnesses something that makes somebody feel sad, quietly explain to them how and why it made them feel that way. (It can be valuable to do this with other emotions, such as fear and happiness, as well.)

Once children are about five, it’s possible to talk about hypothetical situations: how would they feel if someone took a toy away from them? How might a friend feel if someone took away her toy? These discussions can help children to understand that other people have feelings like they do.

When children are eight years old, they’re able to learn that other people may feel differently from them in the same situation – that others may be scared of things that don’t frighten them, for instance, or might be bothered by things that don’t bother them. This is the age where we can start to teach kids to apply general principles of empathy rather than projecting their own emotional responses onto others ^[1].

When we talk with younger children, one of the most important things we can do is show them that it’s okay to talk about how they feel and give them the vocabulary they need to do it. Talking about books, TV shows and videos can be a good jumping-off point for talking about how emotions and different people feel ^[2]. It’s also important to “catch them

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being good” – when children show empathy, praise them for it^[3]. (It’s better not to give external rewards like treats, though, since these actually make children less likely to be empathetic when no reward is being offered^[4].) And while we can’t teach empathy, we can teach children to obey basic rules of courtesy that they can “grow into” as they develop true empathy.

TWEEN AND TEENS

We can encourage older children to more actively put themselves in other people’s shoes. This can relate to actual situations but also can involve hypothetical scenarios and role-playing activities^[5].

It’s also important to teach teens and tweens that despite our best intentions, it can be harder to practice empathy when we’re feeling “hot” emotions like anger, fear or even hunger^[6]. We can help kids to recognize these emotions and to anticipate and manage them – for instance by giving themselves time to cool down before responding to something, avoiding the use of emotionally-loaded words and reminding themselves of larger goals beyond scoring a point or winning an argument^[7].

Finally, we need to teach older kids to avoid “empathy traps” – those habits, attitudes and situations that can keep us from feeling empathy towards others. We’re a lot more likely to encounter these traps online because a lot of the cues that make us feel empathy, such as a person’s tone of voice, facial expression and body language, are usually missing. Here are some tips for staying out of empathy traps online:

- Remember that the people we talk to and play with online are real people. Even if you don’t know them offline, try to imagine a person sitting next to you before you say or type anything.
- Don’t respond right away. When something happens that gets you upset, take some time to let the first rush of anger or fear fade away.
- If you can, talk things out in person rather than online. Remember that other people can’t tell how you’re feeling online either, so it’s easy for drama to blow up online.
- Talk to your friends and family about how you’re feeling. Kids consistently say that just having someone listen to them is one of the most effective ways of dealing with online conflict^[8]. If you can’t talk to someone you know, you can turn to helplines like Kids Help Phone.
- Don’t ask your posse to back you up. Research suggests that getting the same message over and over again – even if it’s from your friends taking your side in an argument – can make angry feelings a lot more intense^[9]. It can also make the drama spread and turn into a much bigger conflict.
- Keep an eye on how you’re feeling! It’s hard to make good decisions when you’re mad, scared or embarrassed. If your heart is racing or you’re feeling tense, it’s time to get offline for a while.

Footnotes

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