



“I Feel Your Pain” – Developing Empathy

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"Why is that man's nose so big?" my three-year-old daughter shouted out in the small café for all to hear. Her brothers were mortified. Her eight-year-old brother whispered, "You can't say things like that." The eleven-year-old followed with, "You will hurt that man's feelings." My bewildered daughter protested, "Well, it is!"

Thank goodness our expectations of three-year-olds are very different than that of older children. It gives us time to work on helping them develop empathy and compassion for others. Being able to walk in the shoes of another person is a critical life skill. Empathic children become caring adults.

The ability to empathize is a highly complex skill. Empathy is defined as the capacity to feel and think what another feels and thinks by observing his verbal and non-verbal cues and then responding appropriately. Yikes! This is a complicated process. It's no wonder that so many children (and adults) struggle with it.

The following is a series of steps for you to help your child develop empathy. This is an arena where it's important that you model appropriate behavior.

Step One: Prompt your child to think about the feelings and reactions of others. Ask your child to think about the needs of others by asking questions such as, "How do you think Julia felt when Jackie made fun of her haircut?"

Step Two: Help your child develop a larger, more detailed vocabulary of feelings. I can't overestimate the value for children of understanding their own feelings and being able to express them in a clear, calm fashion. Children with healthy social behaviors tend to have a social understanding of their own feelings, which helps them tune in to others' feelings.

Step Three: Help your child tune in to the body language and facial expressions of others. Learning this skill can be a lot of fun. Help your child understand the motivations and feelings of others by observing out loud what others' faces and bodies are telling him/her. Highlight for your child the clues people give us to tell us what they are feeling. For example, "I can see by Molly's face that she is unhappy with how that problem got resolved."

Step Four: Teach your child to respond empathetically to others. Even if your child doesn't clearly understand the nuances expressed by others, it's still important that he/she responds as if he/she understands. For example, if Laura tells Ashley that she had a fight with her mom, and Ashley doesn't really understand what they were fighting about, it's still important for her to act as if she understands by appearing to be listening, nodding her head, and having a caring facial expression. You may want to teach your child short words that express empathy. Words like "Oh" (said with a disappointed tone), "Uh oh," and "Wow!" can go a long way in making another child feel heard and understood.

Step Five: Highlight characters' feelings and motives in books, on TV, and in movies. Begin by commenting on a character's reaction to an event. "Whoa! He was really angry." Later, elicit deeper discussion about a character's motivation. "I wonder why she chose to stay?"

Empathy skills can be taught. You will see that with an increased awareness of the feelings of others, your child's relationships will shift and become closer. Children (and adults) need to know that they are understood. Take an active role in helping your child learn these vital life skills.