



How Parents Can Cultivate Empathy in Children

Richard Weissbourd and Stephanie Jones
Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education



Empathy is at the heart of what it means to be human. It's a foundation for acting ethically, for good relationships of many kinds, for loving well, and for professional success. And it's key to preventing bullying and many other forms of cruelty.

Empathy begins with the capacity to take another perspective, to walk in another's shoes. But it is not just that capacity. Salespeople, politicians, actors and marketers are often very skilled at taking other perspectives but they may not care about others. Con men and torturers take other perspectives so they can exploit people's weaknesses. Empathy includes valuing other perspectives and people. It's about perspective-taking and compassion.

How can parents' cultivate empathy? The following are five guideposts based on research and the wisdom of practitioners.

1. Empathize with your child and model empathy for others

Children learn empathy both from watching us and from experiencing our empathy for them. When we empathize with our children they develop trusting, secure attachments with us. Those attachments are key to their wanting to adopt our values and to model *our* behavior, and therefore to building their empathy for others.

Empathizing with our children takes many forms, including tuning in to their physical and emotional needs, understanding and respecting their individual personalities, taking a genuine interest in their lives, and guiding them toward activities that reflect an understanding of the kind of people they are and the things they enjoy.

Children also learn empathy by watching those we notice and appreciate. They'll notice if we treat a server in a restaurant or a mail carrier as if they're invisible. On the positive side, they'll notice if we welcome a new family in our child's school or express concern about another child in our child's class who is experiencing one challenge or another.

Finally, it's important for us to recognize what might be getting in the way of our empathizing. Are we, for example, exhausted or stressed? Does our child push our buttons in a specific way that makes caring for her or him hard at times?



Try this

1. *Knowing your child.* Ask your child questions. For example, what did you learn today that was interesting? What was the hardest part of your day? How would you most like to spend a day if you could do anything? Do you have a friend that you especially respect? Why do you respect that person?

2. *Demonstrating empathy for others, including those different from you.* Consider regularly engaging in community service or model other ways of contributing to a community. Even better, consider doing this with your child. Express interest in those from various backgrounds facing many different types of challenges.
3. *Engaging in self-care and self-reflection.* Try to find time to regularly engage in an activity—whether it’s going for a walk, reading a book, meditating or praying—that can help you avoid being overwhelmed by stress. Reflect and consult with people you trust when you’re having a hard time empathizing with your child.

2. Make caring for others a priority and set high ethical expectations

If children are to value others’ perspectives and show compassion for them, it’s very important that they hear from their parents that caring about others is a top priority, and that it is just as important as their own happiness. Even though most parents say that raising caring children is a top priority, often children aren’t hearing that message.



Try this

1. *Keeping to a clear message.* Consider the daily messages you send to children about the importance of caring. For example, instead of saying “The most important thing is that you’re happy,” you might say “The most important thing is that you’re kind and that you’re happy.”
2. *Prioritizing caring when you talk with other important adults in your children’s lives.* For example, ask teachers and coaches whether your children are caring community members in addition to asking about their academic skills, grades, or performance.
3. *Helping your children understand that the world doesn’t revolve around them.* It’s vital at times for parents to put children’s concern for others above their happiness, for example, insisting at times that children turn off the TV and help around the house, be polite even when they are in a bad mood, or not dominate the airwaves when they are talking to other children or adults.

3. Provide opportunities for children to practice empathy

Children are born with the capacity for empathy, but it needs to be nurtured throughout their lives. Learning empathy is in certain respects like learning a language or a sport. It requires practice and guidance. Regularly considering other people’s perspectives and circumstances helps make empathy a natural reflex and, through trial and error, helps children get better at tuning into others’ feelings and perspectives.



Try this

1. *Having family meetings.* Hold family meetings when there are family challenges or conflicts, and in those meetings give children a voice and encourage them to take the perspective of other family members. Listen carefully to your children's views and ask your children to listen carefully to the views of others.
2. *Encouraging empathy for peers.* Ask children about their classmates and other peers. Ask children when they're in conflicts with peers to consider their peers' perspectives.
3. *Reflecting on empathy and caring.* Notice with your child when you're together and someone exhibits strong empathy—or shows a lack of empathy—either in your daily life or in a book or on television. Discuss why acts of empathy are important and why lacking empathy can be harmful.
4. *Discussing ethical dilemmas.* Discuss with your child ethical dilemmas that help them appreciate various perspectives, e.g., “Should I invite a new neighbor to my birthday party when my best friend doesn't like her?” “Should I tell my friend if I know her boyfriend, who is also my friend, cheated on her?”
5. *Supporting doing with.* Encourage children not just to do service, to “do for” others, but to “do with” others, working with diverse groups of students to respond to community problems.

4. Expand your child's circle of concern

We often talk about empathy as a quantity. For example, we speak of children as having a lot of or a little empathy or as lacking empathy entirely. Yet the issue often isn't whether children *can* empathize or *how much* empathy they have. It is who they have empathy *for*. For most of us, it's not hard to have empathy for our family members and close friends. It's also human nature to have empathy for people who are like us in some way. But the real issue is whether children (and adults) have empathy outside that circle. As parents and caretakers, it's not only important that we model appreciation for many types of people. It's important that we guide children in understanding and caring for many kinds of people who are different from them and who may be facing challenges very different from their own challenges.



Try this:

1. *Zooming in and out.* Help children learn to zoom in, tuning in carefully to others, but also to zoom out, taking in multiple perspectives and people. Use newspaper or TV stories to start conversations with children about other people's hardships and challenges, or simply the different experiences of children in another country or community.
2. *Understanding those who are different or struggling:* Emphasize with your child the importance of really listening to others, especially those people who may seem unfamiliar whom they don't immediately understand. Encourage children to consider the feelings of those who may be vulnerable, such as a child experiencing some family trouble or an unpopular child. Give children some simple ideas for taking action, like comforting a classmate who was teased.

5. Help children develop self-control and manage feelings effectively

Often when children don't express empathy it's not because they don't have it. It's because some feeling or image is blocking their empathy. Often the ability to care for others is overwhelmed, for example, by anger, shame, envy, or other negative feelings.

Helping children manage these negative feelings as well as stereotypes and prejudices about others is often what "releases" their empathy.



Try this

1. *Identifying feelings.* Name for children their difficult feelings such as frustration, sadness and anger and encourage them to talk to you about why they're feeling that way.
2. *3 steps to self-control.* A simple way to help children to manage their feelings is to practice three easy steps together: stop, take a deep breath through the nose and exhale through the mouth, and count to five. Try it when your children are calm. Then, when you see them getting upset, remind them about the steps and do them together.
3. *Resolving conflicts.* Practice with your child how to resolve conflicts. Consider a conflict you or your child witnessed or experienced that turned out badly, and role play different ways of responding. Try to achieve mutual understanding—listening to and paraphrasing each other's feelings until both persons feel understood. If your child observes you experiencing a difficult feeling and is concerned, talk to your child about how you are handling it.

Support from and input from Ashoka: Innovators for the Public was helpful in producing this work. Special thanks to SUNY Cortland's Tom Lickona for his contributions to this document.

For more information about strategies for promoting empathy and for research indicating that empathy is important for school, professional and life success, please visit the [Making Caring Common website](http://makingcaringcommon.org) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

For more information, please visit makingcaringcommon.org

Making Caring Common
Harvard Graduate School of Education
14 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
Phone: 617-385-9544