

# Raising empathetic children

Most kids are the center of their own universe (and many times, the center of ours, too). So it's no shock that empathy doesn't always come naturally.

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes may be a softer skill, but it's not to be ignored. Empathetic children are more likely to make friends more easily, perform better in school, and demonstrate a higher level of moral and emotional development.

And compassion is not something a child is necessarily born possessing. The capacity for empathy is within all children, but it needs to be nurtured from a young age.

"By the time children are 3 1/2 years old, they understand that people think differently," explains Jamie Nordling, Ph.D., social developmental psychologist and assistant professor at Augustana University. "Raising an empathetic child is a part of fostering moral development."

Here are a few ways you can focus on compassion and empathy in your home.

## Model empathetic behaviors.

As a caregiver, the way you treat your child (even as a baby) can model empathy.

Babies are mad, sad, happy and irritable - all in the course of a few minutes. The way you respond and care for your child can build trust and compassion in them.

And as kids get older, the way you treat others will also model compassion. Think of all the small ways you can show empathy.

- How you console friends when their pet dies.
- The reaction you have when someone cuts in front of you at the supermarket.
- How you treat your waitress when she makes a mistake on your order.
- The way you respond to your spouse when he forgets to take out the trash.



"Parents display empathy through actions and words," explains Jamie. "Even little things are important."

These are simple moments that show your child what empathy looks like. It may help to think about how you would want your child to respond to the situation. And remember, apologizing can be an important part of empathy. (Because even parents make mistakes sometimes.)

**now what? Keep Going.**

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## Acknowledge your kids' feelings.

Kids need to understand their own feelings before they can begin to identify the feelings of others. And parents are an important part of this process.

So identify and validate how your kids are feeling, but be willing to let kids process their feelings on their own.

It's common to want to jump in and make challenging feelings go away. But learning to cope with emotions is a key part of your child's emotional development. Instead, try to acknowledge the emotions without discounting the emotions or passing judgment.

Sometimes, that's as simple as saying, "I know that makes you sad." We don't have to fix the problem. By simply labeling the emotion and being present for support, we help them learn to resiliency and cope.

## Give names to feelings.

As children get older, they'll need help to verbalize their feelings. There are a variety of ways you can help kids boost their emotional vocabulary:

- Play a game to help kids identify feelings. Use your facial expressions to display emotions - happy, sad, mad, etc. Ask your child to name the emotion. Then, ask your child to choose an emotion to act out themselves.
- Create flash cards with your child, displaying different feelings on faces.
- When reading books, ask kids to name the emotions of the characters.

## Introduce kids to diversity.

Empathy is easier when everyone the child interacts with is exactly the same. But that's not real life. Instead, expose your kids to people with diverse abilities, backgrounds and experiences.

"Try to introduce your kids to people who are different," says Jamie. "You're teaching them that people come in all different shapes and sizes."

## Give to others.

Getting kids involved in volunteer activities at an early age can be a great way to expose them to different people and also foster empathy. Think about opportunities that would be enjoyable and memorable.

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Maybe your child is a pet lover - try volunteering at the local animal shelter. If your family loves working in the garden, volunteer an afternoon at the Botanical Center. If you have kids who love to get dirty, check out River Action. In other words, there can be opportunities that are both fun and worthwhile.

"It may even be as simple as an angel off a tree over the holidays," explains Jamie. "It's a way to learn that not everyone is as fortunate as you are."

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what?

KEEP GOING.

Be patient. Empathy doesn't happen overnight. Kids won't always show compassion. But it's part of our job as caregivers to show them how to grow into compassionate adults.

We can do this by working empathy into our everyday lives - by helping kids develop their emotional language, modeling empathy ourselves, and exposing them to diversity in the world.



*Originally posted on the Now What? Blog 3/25/15. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to*

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

*Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.*

**now what? Keep Going.**