

Building Empathy

Most people would agree that the ability to be empathetic is a positive, valuable skill. The good news is that it is a quality that can be taught and nurtured.

Empathy is a complex phenomenon involving several component skills:

- A sense of self-awareness and the ability to distinguish one's own feelings from the feelings of others.
- Taking another person's perspective (or, alternatively, "putting oneself in another person's shoes").
- Being able to regulate one's own emotional responses.

Some key ideas for building empathy include:

1. **Meet your child's emotional needs and respect them as individuals.**
Children will more likely develop a strong sense of empathy if they feel their own emotional needs are being met. When they experience understanding and support, they are more likely to demonstrate it to others. Being empathetic with a child does not mean condoning poor behavior choices. But as caring adults, we can acknowledge the child's feelings and show that we understand why the child made the choice he did, help him problem solve and still respectfully hold him accountable for his actions.
2. **Model empathy.**
Parents can model empathy both to their own children and to other people. Help a friend who is moving, shovel the neighbor's snowy walkway, take a meal to someone who is sick, etc. Even better is to involve your children with these opportunities. Find ways for them to give of themselves, like making Valentine cards for the elderly in extended care facilities. There are plenty of opportunities at home to practice empathy within the family. Helping carry in groceries and making a get well card for a sibling are a couple examples.
3. **Point out empathy.**
Help children notice when other people demonstrate empathy. This could be on a TV program, a video, a movie or some real-life situation. Discuss how the people involved might feel.
4. **Help children notice similarities with others.**
Children are more likely to feel empathy for people who are familiar and similar to them. Helping children be aware of the things they have in common with other people humanizes the victims of tragedy and enables children to respond with empathy.
5. **Explore other roles and perspectives with your child.**
Characters from books and television offer opportunities for children to practice perspective-taking skills. What do the characters think, believe, feel and how do we know it? Family discussions around another character's perspective and even role playing can enhance a child's ability to empathize. Just imitating certain facial expressions can have a positive effect on building empathy.
6. **Use an authoritative parenting style.**
Children who are raised with a lot of rewards or arbitrary rules and punishment do not internalize right and wrong as readily as children who are raised with an approach that is

respectful and emphasizes rational explanations and moral consequences. Children are more likely to internalize moral principles when their parents talk to them about how wrong-doing affects other people.

7. Use conflict resolution to teach empathy.

Young children will need adult support to navigate conflict resolution, especially between siblings. When there is an altercation, it is helpful if the adult points out the nonverbal expressions each child is displaying. Talking about how one child's action may have affected the other child is also helpful. Give children words to express their feelings. Finally, give the children a chance to make amends to each other. This might be a hug, drawing a picture, or sharing a toy. This kind of problem solving can only occur successfully if emotions have calmed. You may need to give voice to their feelings and then separate the children initially.

Teaching empathy to young children is not going to be just one lesson. Children need a lot of repetition to absorb a concept. Consistency in your parenting, in how you model empathy, what you say about other people, how you address an issue with your own child all are key to building children who are empathetic.

Resources:

1. Nurture Shock: New Thinking about Children by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman
2. Positive Discipline by Jane Nelsen
3. Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, the Heart of Parenting by John Gottman Ph.D.

Positive Discipline

GUIDELINES

From the book *Positive Discipline*, by Jane Nelsen

1 *Misbehaving children are “discouraged children”* who have mistaken ideas on how to achieve their **primary goal—to belong**. Their mistaken ideas lead them to misbehavior. We cannot be effective unless we address the mistaken beliefs rather than just the misbehavior.

2 Use **encouragement** to help children feel “belonging” so the motivation for misbehaving will be eliminated. Celebrate each step in the direction of improvement rather than focusing on mistakes.

3 A great way to help children feel encouraged is to **spend special time** “being with them.” Many teachers have noticed a dramatic change in a “problem child” after spending five minutes simply sharing what they both like to do for fun.

4 When tucking children into bed, ask them to **share with you** their “saddest time” during the day and their “happiest time” during the day. Then **you share with them**. You will be surprised what you learn.

5 Have **family meetings** or **class meetings** to solve problems with cooperation and mutual respect. This is the key to creating a loving, respectful atmosphere while helping children develop self-discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and problem-solving skills.

6 Give children **meaningful jobs**. In the name of expediency, many parents and teachers do things that children could do for themselves and one another. **Children feel belonging when they know they can make a real contribution.**

7 **Decide together** what jobs need to be done. Put them all in a jar and let each child draw out a few each week; that way no one is stuck with the same jobs all the time. Teachers can invite children to help them make class rules and list them on a chart titled, “We decided.” Children have ownership, motivation, and enthusiasm when they are included in the decisions.

8 **Take time for training.** Make sure children understand what “clean the kitchen” means to you. To them it may mean simply putting the dishes in the sink. Parents and teachers may ask, “What is your understanding of what is expected?”

9 **Teach and model mutual respect.** One way is to **be kind and firm at the same time**—kind to show respect for the child, and firm to show respect for yourself and “the needs of the situation.” This is difficult during conflict, so use the next guideline whenever you can.

10 Proper **timing** will improve your effectiveness tenfold. It does not “work” to deal with a problem at the time of conflict—emotions get in the way. Teach children about **cooling-off periods**. You (or the children) can go to a separate room and do something to make yourself feel better—and then work on the problem with mutual respect.

11 **Get rid of the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first you have to make them feel worse.** Do you feel like doing better when you feel humiliated? This suggests a whole new look at “time out.”

12 **Use Positive Time Out.** Let your children help you design a pleasant area (cushions, books, music, stuffed animals) that will help them feel better. Remember that children do better when they feel better. Then you can ask your children, when they are upset, “Do you think it would help you to take some positive time out?”

13 Punishment may “work” if all you are interested in is stopping misbehavior for “the moment.” Sometimes we must **beware of what works** when the long-range results are negative—resentment, rebellion, revenge, or retreat.

14 Teach children that **mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn!** A great way to teach children that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn is to model this yourself by using the Three Rs of Recovery after you have made a mistake:

- (1) **Recognize your mistake.**
- (2) **Reconcile: Be willing to say “I’m sorry, I didn’t like the way I handled that.”**
- (3) **Resolve: Focus on solutions rather than blame.**
(#3 is effective only if you do #1 & #2 first.)

15 Focus on **solutions** instead of **consequences**. Many parents and teachers try to disguise punishment by calling it a logical consequence. Get children involved in finding solutions that are:

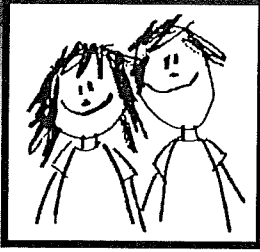
- (1) **Related**
- (2) **Respectful**
- (3) **Reasonable**
- (4) **Helpful**

16 **Make sure the message of love and respect gets through.** Start with “I care about you. I am concerned about this situation. Will you work with me on a solution?”

17 **Have fun!**
Bring joy into homes and classrooms.

VISIT US ONLINE AT www.positivediscipline.com

THESE GUIDELINES CAN BE VIEWED OR DOWNLOADED AT
www.empoweringpeople.com/guidelines.html



DEVELOPING CAPABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

From the book *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World* by H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelsen

Seven Strategies for Developing Capable Young People

1 Recognize that the rate and intensity with which knowledge, technology, and lifestyle are changing have created conditions in which resiliency and personal resources are critical to effective living and learning.

2 Encourage the development of seven resources of highly resilient and capable people:

- a. **Strong perceptions of personal capabilities.** "I am capable of facing problems and challenges and gaining strength and wisdom through experience."
- b. **Strong perceptions of significance.** "My life has meaning and purpose, and I contribute in unique and meaningful ways."
- c. **Strong perceptions of personal influence over life.** "I can influence what I do in life and am accountable for my actions and choices."
- d. **Strong intrapersonal skills.** The ability to manage personal emotions through self-assessment, self-control, and self-discipline.
- e. **Strong interpersonal skills.** The ability to communicate, cooperate, negotiate, share, empathize, listen, and work effectively with people.
- f. **Strong systemic skills.** The ability to respond to the limits and consequences of everyday life with responsibility, adaptability, flexibility, and integrity.
- g. **Strong judgmental skills.** The ability to make decisions based on moral and ethical principles, wisdom, and understanding.

3 Provide opportunities in homes and classrooms for children to develop the significant seven. Strategies such as family/class meetings, mentoring, and firmness with dignity and respect can provide opportunities for children to develop all of these resources.

4 Create and use rituals, traditions, and service projects as opportunities for growth and empowerment for children.

5 Increase the use of dialogue (a meaningful exchange of ideas and perceptions) as the essential process for encouraging closeness, trust, and learning: "What are your thoughts about that?" **Avoid** "Did you? Can you? Will you? Won't you? Is everything okay?" etc. **Instead use** What? How? When? In what way _____?" etc.

6 Build closeness and trust, and convey respect by avoiding the **Five Barriers** and using the **Five Builders** instead:

Barrier #1: Assuming: Acting on limiting assumptions about what a person can or can't do, say, think, etc. "I didn't tell you because you always get upset." "You always think ____." "You're too young to try that!" etc.

Builder #1: Checking: Giving people a clean slate: "How do you want to deal with this?" "What are your thoughts about ____?" "What will you need to have ready for ____?" etc.

Barrier #2: Rescuing/Explaining: Problem solving for a person: "____ is what is happening." "____ is why it is happening." "____ is how to deal with it." "Do it this way." etc.

Builder #2: Exploring: Problem solving with a person by letting them try something and then asking: "What did you experience in that situation?" "Why is that significant?" "How might you apply what you have learned in the future?" etc.

Barrier #3: Directing: Telling people what to do: "Pick up your shoes." "Put that away." "Don't forget your lunch." "Be sure and ____." Etc.

Builder #3: Inviting: Asking for participation/assistance: "I would appreciate any help you could give me in straightening up the room." "How do you plan to ____?" "What will you need to do in order to ____?" etc.

Barrier #4: Expecting: (too much too soon) Using potential as a standard and discounting people for not being there already: "I was expecting this room to be spotless." "You should know that already." "I appreciate ____ but you forgot ____." etc.

Builder #4: Celebrating: Focusing on effort progress and/or what was gained by trying: "I appreciate the effort you have made to clean up this room." "What did you learn from trying to do that?" "What progress do you see yourself making?" etc.

Barrier #5: Adultisms: Using stereotypes when dealing with people: "Teenagers are like that." "You know better than that! Surely you realize!" "You are too young to appreciate that." "Grow-up!" "Why are you so childish." etc.

Builder #5: Respect: Allowing for people's uniqueness and individuality: "What is your perception of ____?" or "Let me check out what you think." "How do you see this issue?" etc.

7 Improve your relationships 100% by avoiding the **Five Barriers**. Where can you get that kind of return for doing less? Replace the Barriers with the **Builders** and double the positive impact of your contributions!

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