

Empathy: Foundation of Emotional Health

By

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<https://www.peacefulparenthappykids.com/read/emotional-health>

I see parents and children make breakthroughs every day. And guess what makes the most difference? Empathy. If we can actually see things from our child's perspective, everything changes.

Empathy doesn't mean agreeing with our children, or letting them do whatever they want just because we understand why they want to. But it does mean that while our children don't get everything they want, they get something better: Someone who understands and accepts them, no matter what.

It also means that once we understand our child's perspective, we can intervene to help them meet the needs that they were trying to meet all along, from feeling connected to feeling valued. And when we meet kids' needs, they behave better.

Empathy is the foundation of emotional intelligence. It's also the foundation of effective parenting, according to John Gottman, the author of **Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child**. Why?

- Because it's essential to your ability to understand your child and bond with them.
- Because it will prevent you from visiting on your child all the issues from your own childhood.
- And because without it, your child simply won't feel loved, no matter how much you love them.

What exactly is Empathy?

Empathy is often defined as seeing things from the other person's point of view. But a more accurate definition might be "feeling" from the other person's point of view.

Empathy is actually a physical event, controlled by the insula in our right brain. The structure of the right brain is formed during the first two years of life, before your baby becomes verbal.

Scientists suspect that the right brain is the orchestrator of intimacy. The insula connects the brain with the heart, digestive organs, and skin. So when our heart leaps, or our stomach turns, or our skin crawls, the insula is sending us a message. And when we feel deep empathy, we feel it in our bodies.

Empathy strengthens the relationship bond. Empathy helps the child to feel understood, less alone with her pain and suffering. Empathy heals.

And the experience of empathy teaches the little one about the deepest ways that humans connect, providing her with a launching pad for every future relationship. In fact, the experience of empathy wires the child's brain for emotional health. Children who receive empathy not only feel more connection to others throughout their lives, they're more compassionate and understanding, so they enjoy deeper relationships.

How do children develop empathy?

It happens naturally, as part of healthy emotional development, as long as children experience empathy from their caretakers. That's why parenting with empathy is a double gift to your child: In addition to your empathy helping him learn to manage his emotions, experiencing your empathy will also help him to develop empathy for others.

This giving of empathy is also a gift to you, because children who feel your empathy are much more cooperative in accepting your guidance. Translation: It makes parenting a lot easier!

But most parents find the idea of parenting with empathy anxiety-producing. How exactly do you “do” it?

You already know. Every time you say, *“I know how you feel”* or *“Looks like you had a hard day,”* you’re being empathic. Every time you rise above your own feelings to see things from your child’s point of view, that’s empathy.

Sounds simple, right? Then why is empathy so powerful?

Humans are creatures of passion. Emotions are constantly arising within us, influencing our moods and actions, and then passing away. Think of the strongest emotions you’ve felt in the past month, and then imagine how powerful your child’s emotions are, given his inexperience and intellectual immaturity. Kids are swept with passionate feelings many times a day.

They need their parents to help them learn to navigate this world of emotion, so that they don’t get swamped by its intensity. Most of the time, when children (and adults) feel their emotions are understood, they are able to accept and feel them. The “message” is delivered. After this, the emotions lose their charge and begin to dissipate. We don’t have to act on those emotions, or even to like them. We merely have to acknowledge their presence, and they begin to evaporate.

Repressed feelings, on the other hand, don’t fade away. We carry them with us. Repressed feelings are trapped and looking for a way out. Because they aren’t under conscious control, they pop out unmodulated, when a preschooler socks her sister, or a seven year old has nightmares, or an eleven year develops a nervous tic.

So our empathy -- our acceptance of our children's emotions -- teaches them that their emotional life is not dangerous, is not shameful, and in fact is universal and manageable. Everyone has felt this feeling; there’s even a name for it! The child feels understood and accepted. They learn that they aren’t left all alone to cope with the crush of those powerful emotions. It's safe to feel them, which is the first step to working them through, and learning to manage them. So empathy is the foundation of emotional intelligence.

What Empathy Isn’t:

Permissiveness.

You can (and should) set limits as necessary. And then acknowledge your child's unhappiness about those limits. Don't be defensive. It's important to your child that you're able to tolerate his

disappointment and anger at you, and that you love him even when he's not in touch with his love for you.

Solving the problem.

Your goal is to let your child get past his upset so that he can begin to think about solutions himself, not to solve it for him. When he expresses his feelings about something, you'll want to listen and acknowledge, rather than jumping in with solutions. That means you'll have to manage your own anxiety about the issue.

Agreeing.

Accepting his feelings and reflecting them does not mean you agree with them or endorse them. You are showing him you understand, nothing more, and nothing less. And if you've ever felt understood, you understand just how great a gift this is.

Probing.

"Tell me how you feel" is not empathy. Empathy is acknowledging whatever she's showing or telling you: *"You're telling me you wish you could play longer."* or *"I see your face looking like this."*

Trying to change the feeling or cheer the person up.

I promise you, empathizing with the bad feeling is the fastest way to let it dissipate. Arguing her out of the bad feeling just pushes it under to resurface later. After she has a chance to notice, accept, and express the feeling, she will feel ready to move on to a change of scene and topic. This could take awhile, but it will become faster as your child realizes that no one is minimizing their emotions by pushing them to "get over it." And you've given her the message that ALL of her is acceptable, including her yucky feelings.

Arguing with the feeling.

That just invalidates him.

What Empathy Is:

Listening without the pressure to solve anything.

Don't take it personally. Breathe. Detach.

Acknowledging and Reflecting.

"It sounds like you're pretty angry at your brother." or
"It seems like you're worried about the field trip today."

Resonating.

What matters most is that your child FEELS your understanding. Match your reaction with his mood. Being a bit downcast because his team lost the soccer game doesn't merit a reaction from you as if someone had died. Similarly, mechanically parroting *"It can be hard when your boyfriend splits up with you"* is likely to evoke hysteric rage from your teen.

"When children feel understood, their loneliness and hurt diminish. When children are understood, their love for their parent is deepened. A parent's sympathy serves as emotional first aid for bruised feelings. When we genuinely acknowledge a child's plight and voice her disappointment, she often gathers the strength to face reality."

-Haim Ginott

For More on Empathy: When Empathy Doesn't "Work"

Recommended Resources

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish offers extremely helpful advice for putting empathy into practice.