Cool to Be Kind

by Kirsten Weir

Put yourself in somebody else's shoes.

Amanda O. was in fourth grade when her mom passed away. Amanda had been bullied before, and, incredibly, older kids at school teased her about her devastating loss. "People bullied me about how I looked, how I dressed. They bullied me about my mom," says the 14-year-old from El Paso, Texas.

Amanda told the principal, who called the bullies' parents. Amanda also confronted the kids herself. "I said, 'You didn't know my mom. She was my best friend. If you lost a best friend, how would you feel?'"

The bullies backed off, and Amanda felt good about standing up for herself. She may not have realized it at the time, but Amanda was asking her tormentors to have a little empathy.

"Empathy is a matter of learning how to understand someone else-both what they think and how they feel," says Jennifer Freed, a family therapist and codirector of a teen program called the Academy of Healing Arts.

In other words, empathy is being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Many people who bully others are particularly weak in that department, says Malcolm Watson, a psychologist at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. "Bullies don't tend to have a lot of empathy," he says.

Everyone is different, and levels of empathy differ from person to person. "Some people are more highly sensitive than others. They will naturally feel what other people feel," Freed says. "Others don't understand emotions in other people as well."

The good news? "Empathy is something you can learn," Freed says. In fact, she adds, teaching empathy to prevent bullying is more effective than punishing bullies after the fact. And anyone can learn it. In her teen programs, she says, "every semester we see bullies change their behavior."

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Volunteering is a good way to develop more empathy, experts say.
Jose L. Pelaez/Corbis

You don't have to be a bully to benefit from developing empathy. Having compassion for others is a valuable skill that everyone should work to improve, she says. "I think everyone needs to develop more of it."

Emotional Intelligence

In 2010, researchers from the University of Michigan reported that empathy among college students had dropped sharply over the past 10 years. That could be because so many people have replaced face time with screen time, the researchers said. Having empathy is about understanding other people. Today, people spend more time solo and are less likely to join groups and clubs.

Freed has another explanation. Turn on the TV, and you're bombarded with news and reality shows highlighting people fighting, competing, and generally treating one another with no respect. Humans learn by example-and most of the examples on TV are anything but empathetic.

There are good reasons not to follow those bad examples. Humans are social by nature. Having relationships with other people is an important part of being human-and having empathy is critical to those relationships. Researchers have also found that empathetic teenagers are more likely to have high self-esteem. That's not all. In a book titled *The Power*

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of Empathy, psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli writes that empathy can be a cure for loneliness, depression, anxiety, and fear.

Empathy is also a sign of a good leader. In fact, Freed says, many top companies report that empathy is one of the most important things they look for in new executives. Good social skills-including empathy-are a kind of "emotional intelligence" that will help you succeed in many areas of life. "Academics are important. But if you don't have emotional intelligence, you won't be as successful in work or in your love life," she says.

What's the best way to up your empathy quotient? For starters, let down your guard and really listen to others. "One doesn't develop empathy by having a lot of opinions and doing a lot of talking," Freed says. Here are some great ways to dig beneath the surface and really get to know other people-and to boost empathy in the process:

- Volunteer at a nursing home or a hospital. Challenging yourself to care for others is a great way to learn empathy, Freed says.
- Join a club or a team that has a diverse membership. You can learn a lot from people of different ages, races, or backgrounds.
- Spend time caring for pets at an animal shelter.
- Once a week, have a "sharing circle" with your family. Take turns listening to one another talk, without interrupting.

Playing Your Part

With bullying such a big issue in schools around the country, experts are looking more closely at empathy. Many schools are teaching teens how to tune in to others' feelings. Often, kids who bully others come from homes where empathy is in short supply, says Watson. Teaching them empathy skills can help squash their aggressive behavior. Just focusing on the bullies and their victims isn't enough to stop the bullying crisis, though. To do that, everyone in school must show some empathy.

Have you ever watched a classmate being teased or pushed around, without intervening? Imagine that victim was your little brother or a close friend. How would you feel about the situation then? It takes both courage and empathy to confront a bully or to report an incident to a teacher. It may not be easy, but working together is the best way to make schools safer, Watson says.

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That makes sense to Patrick K., a 16-year-old from South Carolina. He was bullied in middle school and lived in constant fear. One day one of his tormentors threatened to kill him and later threw a rock at his head during gym class.

Fortunately, Patrick's family moved to a new school district not long after that incident, and things are much better at his new school. But he wasn't content to just sit back and let other kids suffer the way he had. He became a teen ambassador for Love Our Children USA's STOMP Out Bullying campaign.

Last year, Patrick saw a classmate getting pushed around at school. He immediately reported the incident to the principal and a guidance counselor. The school called the kids in to sort out the problem, he says. Patrick doesn't think he did anything special. "I feel that everybody should be treated with respect," he says. "I just felt like it was the right thing to do."

Expressing Empathy-Creatively

If you've ever been called nasty names, you know how awful it feels. Here's your chance to help others understand what it's like to walk in your shoes. The No Name-Calling Week Creative Expression Contest wants your poems, artwork, essays, music, and videos! Tune in to your artistic side to illustrate how name-calling has affected you and your peers. No Name-Calling Week happens each year in January. (But being kind is cool any week of the year.)

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Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. What is empathy?

A. Empathy is the ability to make other people do what you want by threatening them.

B. Empathy is the ability to understand how other people think and feel.

C. Empathy is the choice that many people make to spend time alone instead of joining groups.

D. Empathy is the choice that many people make to watch TV shows full of fighting and disrespectful words.

2. What problem does developing empathy help solve?

A. Developing empathy helps solve the problem of unexpected death.

B. Developing empathy helps solve the problem of homelessness.

C. Developing empathy helps solve the problem of lung cancer.

D. Developing empathy helps solve the problem of bullying.

3. Empathy is something people can learn.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

A. Teaching empathy to prevent bullying is more effective than punishing bullies after the fact.

B. After Amanda O.'s mom died, older kids at school teased her about her devastating loss.

C. Patrick K.'s tormentors threatened to kill him and later threw a rock at his head during gym class.

D. Researchers from the University of Michigan reported that empathy among college students had dropped sharply over the past 10 years.

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4. What policy would most likely result in a decrease in bullying at school?

A. a policy requiring students to spend at least three hours doing homework every night

B. a policy requiring students to take more math and science classes but fewer arts and language classes

C. a policy requiring students to volunteer every month at a nursing home, hospital, or animal shelter

D. a policy discouraging students from speaking up or taking action if they notice a classmate being teased

5. What is this passage mostly about?

A. fear and loneliness

B. depression and anxiety

C. poems and music

D. empathy and bullying

6. Read the following sentences: "Have you ever watched a classmate being teased or pushed around, without intervening? Imagine that victim was your little brother or a close friend. How would you feel about the situation then? It takes both courage and empathy to confront a **bully** or to report an incident to a teacher."

What does the word **bully** mean above?

A. a person who naturally feels what other people feel

B. a person who teases, threatens, or harms someone else

C. a person who does research studies on how students behave

D. a person who is a good leader and successful at work

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7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

There are several ways to develop empathy, _____ listening closely to others and getting to know people from many different backgrounds.

A. such as

B. although

C. never

D. before

8. How much empathy do bullies tend to have?

9. Name two benefits of empathy mentioned in the passage.

10. Therapist Jennifer Freed thinks that everyone needs to develop more empathy. Based on the information in the passage, explain whether developing more empathy is or is not a good idea.

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