



Encouraging Empathy

What is empathy?

Empathy is the **ability to understand how someone else is feeling and respond with care**. It is one of the most important skills your child will ever learn. Empathy helps children make friends, share, and get along with others. It starts to develop in the very first years of life.

How does empathy develop?

Empathy grows slowly over time. Here is what to expect:

- ▶ Around 6 months, babies start **looking to you to understand how to feel about new people** and situations. If you seem calm and happy, they will feel safe. If you look scared, they may feel fear.
- ▶ Between 18 and 24 months, toddlers begin to **understand that other people have their own thoughts and feelings**. And those feelings may be different from their own. This is a big step!
- ▶ By age 3 and 4, children are **getting better at recognizing feelings**. They can recognize when others feel happy, sad, scared, and angry. They may start to respond with care.

Empathy is a complex skill that takes years to develop. Even many adults are still working on it!



How you can help

- ▶ **Show empathy.** When you are kind and caring toward others, your child learns from your example. You are their greatest teacher.
- ▶ **Name feelings out loud.** Talk about feelings throughout the day. Say, "Kayla looks sad because you took her toy. Let's give it back and see if she feels better."
- ▶ **Notice hard emotions.** When your child is upset, let them know their feelings are okay. Say, "I know you are really mad. It is okay to feel mad." This lets them know that strong feelings are normal. Teach them healthy ways to express their big feelings.
- ▶ **Use pretend play.** Act out feelings with stuffed animals or dolls. Ask your child, "Teddy lost his balloon. How do you think he feels? What can we do to help him?"
- ▶ **Read books about feelings.** Stories are a great way to help children learn about emotions.
- ▶ **Ask how others feel.** Point out the feelings of the people around you. Ask, "Why do you think she is smiling?" or "What do you think he is feeling now?" If you watch videos with your child, ask about the feelings of their favorite characters, too.
- ▶ **Focus on the other person, not just "I'm sorry."** Instead of just asking your child to say sorry after a dispute with another child, help them look at how the other person feels. Say, "Look at your friend — she is crying. Let's see if she is okay."

Empathy takes time to learn. All young children focus on themselves. Being selfish at this age is normal and part of growing up. It is not a sign that something is wrong. But with your love and guidance, your child will build empathy for years to come.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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