

# Empathy

The aspect of Intellectual Character that school will focus more closely on during this half term is 'empathy'

Empathy is a willingness to listen to others, to value and try to understand their position, feelings and points of view.

*'Instead of putting others in their place, put yourself in their place.' Proverb*

Promoting empathy leads to greater individual and community health. Having empathy also reduces negative factors such as depression, anger and aggression. In turn this can lead to improved attitudes towards school and create a more effective academic experience.

## Promoting Empathy

It is important to realise that Empathy is not an innate or fixed trait - a talent that some people are born with, and others lack. Empathy is something that can be developed. This is more difficult than ever in a modern era of celebrity culture and reality television. We live in the age of the 'selfie' —the ubiquitous symbol of narcissism. This focus on the self to the exclusion of others can be harmful to children. More than the photos themselves, the idea behind them—that we are the centre of our world— can reflect a decreased focus on others and a lack of empathy.

Promoting empathy is like turning the mirror of the selfie into a window through which to gain perspective and understanding. A mirror can be seen to symbolise self-centeredness, where adolescents see themselves and care only for their own feelings. Windows symbolise empathy, where the child is able to look beyond their own needs and put themselves in another person's position.

Understanding a little more about Empathy will help in how we promote it to adolescents. Some psychologists argue that the word "empathy" has become a "catch-all" term for three distinct processes:

**Emotional sharing.** This occurs when we experience feelings of distress as a result of observing distress in another individual.

**Empathetic concern.** This is the motivation to care for individuals who are vulnerable or distressed.

**Perspective-taking.** The ability to consciously put oneself in the mind of another individual and imagine what that person is thinking or feeling.

When we speak in everyday terms of someone being "very empathetic," or showing "low empathy," we're probably guilty of mixing up several distinct concepts.

Certainly, some individuals score high in all three areas, and others (a very small portion of the population) may test poorly across the board. But it's common for people to experience these phenomena in varying degrees - and to change over time. Many young children show high levels of emotional sharing; demonstrate strong, but more limited, evidence of empathic concern; and struggle with certain types of perspective-taking. As children get older, their perspective-taking skills improve, especially when they have the opportunity to practice.

## Ideas to help develop empathy proactively

1. Discuss current affairs with your child and ask them how they think the people in the news piece might be feeling.
2. Encourage empathy through stories. Adults can help children develop empathy through reading books that let them get inside characters' minds, or watching inspiring movies. Activities that allow careful reflection on how others are feeling in a given situation help build the skills needed for moral action. The right book or film matched with the right child can be the gateway to greater reflection and openness with feelings.
3. Modelling is very important. It's fine to allow children to see that adults are human too. For example, tell them a story about a time when you might have suspected a friend was in trouble, what you were thinking about at the time and what you did to help.

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4. Help them to problem-solve different situations. For example, “How would you like to be treated if you were the new boy?”, “If you were being teased, what would you want your friends to do to help?”, or “If you had been away from school for three weeks, what would you like people to say when you came back?”

### Some Examples

**Scenario 1:** Your child comes home from school and starts telling you about a friend who has been really grumpy

You could respond with....

Option A: “Well, you sometimes behave like that too you know”.

And the teenager may walk out of the room in a huff.

Option B: “Well, just leave her alone for a while, she’ll get over it.”

Attempting to solve the problem for the teenager is not the response they are looking for. It doesn’t teach them anything and it tells them you are not really interested in listening to the full story.

Option C: ASK QUESTIONS. “Okay, tell me how she has been behaving”, “What do you think has been going on with her recently?”, “What could make her behave this way?”, “Do you think there’s anything we can do to help?”, “If you were your friend, what would you like others to do?”

This option helps your child put themselves in their friend’s shoes (perspective taking) and think about the best way to respond (empathetic concern).

**Scenario 2:** Your child is refusing to come to their grandmother’s birthday party because they want to hang out a friend’s gathering instead.

You could respond with....

Option A: “Well, you’re being really selfish. You have to come and that’s just tough luck”.

A teenager is likely to attend the event but spend the whole time sulking and checking their phone.

Option B: “Fine, don’t come. But just remember that your grandmother won’t be around forever.” Your child might consider grandma’s feelings for a moment but quickly forget and enjoy a lovely Saturday night with their friends. They may feel guilty enough to come but will continue to resent you for making them feel that way.

Option C: ASK QUESTIONS. “Okay, tell me why it’s so important that you go to this gathering?”, “What do you think your night will be like if you come to grandma’s party?”, “What do you think she would like to do/have for her party?”, “Do you think she minds if you don’t come?”, “If you can’t come, what do you think you could do to make sure grandma still knows you care about her?” Your child may or may not end up coming. If they don’t come, they should be strongly encouraged to call Grandma themselves to explain.

Of course, these conversations don’t always go as planned. You may get a lot of “dunno”s in response to your questions. Pick and choose your moments to try to have these chats and try your hardest to make your tone of voice sound curious and neutral. One thing adolescents seem good at is picking up on tone of voice. If they suspect that you have an agenda when trying to have a conversation with them, you are not likely to get very far.

### Ideas to help develop empathy reactively

One simple framework used by some researchers suggests four steps to help children respond more empathically with “CARE”:

- 1) **C**all attention to uncaring behaviour;
- 2) **A**ssess how uncaring affects others, helping children to understand another’s perspective;
- 3) **R**epair the hurt and make amends;
- 4) **E**xpress disappointment for uncaring behaviour, while stressing expectations for caring behaviour in the future.

The trick is to look for those moments when we can help children grasp how their actions affect others so it stretches their empathy, and one day they can act right without guidance.

*‘I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.’ - Maya Angelou*

