

# Developing Empathy in Families

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## Definitions and Origins of Empathy

EMPATHY: The fundamental "people" skill.

Empatheia - "feeling into." The ability to perceive the subjective experience of another person.

An empathic response is an attempt to put ourselves in the other person's place so that our feelings will suggest to us not only his emotions but also his motives.

Empathy is trying to understand the other from the inside - not from the outside as an interested observer.

The word "empathy" was first used in the 1920's by American psychologist E.B. Titchner referring to motor mimicry observed in one-year-olds who imitated the distress of someone else.

Titchner believed that empathy stemmed from a sort of physician imitation of the distress of another, which then evokes the same feelings in oneself.

As Gallo (1989) stated: *...an empathic response is one which contains both a cognitive and an affective dimension...the term empathy is used in at least two ways; to mean a predominantly cognitive response, understanding how another feels, or to mean an affective communion with the other (p.100).*

Carl Rogers (1975) wrote: *...the state of empathy or being empathic is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and means which pertain as if one were the person, but without ever losing the as if condition (Quoted in Gallo 1989).*

Haynes and Avery characterize empathy as: *...the ability to recognize and understand another person's perceptions and feelings, and to accurately convey that understanding through an accepting response (p. 257).*

And, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines empathy as: *...understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts and motives of one are readily comprehended by another."*

Empathy is typically defined as including: (1) the affective capacity to share in another's feelings, and (2) the cognitive ability to understand another's feelings and perspective. Definitions sometimes also include the ability to communicate one's empathic feelings and understanding to another by verbal and/or nonverbal means.

## Critical Aspects of Empathy

1. Awareness of the state of being of another.
2. Understanding of this condition.
3. A personal identification with the situation.
4. Appropriate affective response.

## General Research Findings on Empathy

1. Females exhibit higher levels of empathy than males; however, there is some evidence that empathy training reduces this difference.
2. Empathy and prosocial behavior increase with age; however, empathy training has been shown to reduce the differential in empathy between very young children and older ones.
3. Along with knowledge, self-determination, and strategy utilization, empathy is coming to be regarded by more and more educators as a key attribute of a successful learner.

4. In general, the higher people score on the measures of empathy and prosocial behavior, the higher their scores on measure of critical, higher-order thinking. Role-taking, in particular, enhances open mindedness and reasoning capabilities.
5. Classroom strategies and program designs which are positively related to empathy and prosocial interactions are:
  - Cooperative learning structures involving learning teams made up of representatives of different racial/ethnic groups, academic ability levels, both genders, the differently abled, socioeconomic groups.
  - Cross-age and peer tutoring.
6. Emotionally disturbed children exhibit greater empathy and prosocial behavior when taught in learning environments featuring components known to promote these qualities - focus on one's behavior affects others, role-taking, etc.
  - Learning environments characterized by extrinsic rewards or punishments, and behavioral charting are negatively related to the development of empathy/prosocial behavior in emotionally disturbed children.

## Road Blocks to Empathy

1. Emotional neglect results in dulling empathy.
2. Stress acts to dampen empathy towards the needs of others.
3. Emotional abuse results in hyper vigilance to cues that have signaled threat. Such obsessive preoccupation with feelings of others as children often results in adults who suffer intense emotional ups and downs.
4. Some research suggests an absence of empathy or caring can sometimes stem from a neural deficit.

## Absence of Empathy

1. Emotional detachment to self, another person, or cause/situation.
2. Blotting out empathy is part of the emotional cycle of victimization.
3. Sexual abuse: *"I'm not hurting the child, just showing love."*
4. Rape: *"She was just playing hard to get."*
5. Physical abuse: *"This is for your own good."*
6. Emotional abuse: *"Constructive Criticism."*
7. Spouse abuse: *"Keep her in line."*

## Development of Empathy in Children

Hoffman sees a natural progression in empathy:

- After one year, infants become more aware that they are distinct from others, and try to soothe another crying infant.
- Around two years of age, children begin to realize that someone else's feelings differ from their own and become more sensitive to cues revealing what another child feels.

- In late childhood, advanced empathy emerges and children can understand distress beyond the immediate situation.

## Empathy: Gender Differences

Ronald Levant, in his book, *Masculinity Reconstructed*, identifies two types of empathy - emotional and action.

Emotional empathy is being aware of the feelings of another.

Action empathy is the ability to observe others and problem solve on how to fix their problem. He states, "*Boys are socialized to be less emotionally empathic and more action empathic and girls just the opposite.*"

Haviland and Malatests (1981) state that boys are born more emotionally reactive and expressive than females. Males:

- startle more easily
- become excited more quickly
- have lower tolerance for tension and frustration
- become distressed more quickly
- cry sooner and more often
- are more irritable
- are less easily soothed
- fluctuate more rapidly between emotional states

Three powerful influences:

- mother
- father
- peer group

Emotions are rechanneled into three separate streams:

- into action empathy
- into emotional numbness
- into the catch-all emotion of anger

## Empathy and Child Rearing

Child rearing practices positively associated with the development of empathetic understanding and behavior include:

- Responsive, nonpunitive, nonauthoritarian behavior of mothers toward their preschool children.
- Explaining to children the effects of their behavior on others.
- Pointing out to children that they have the power to make others happy by being kind and generous to them.
- Parental modeling of empathetic, caring behavior.
- Explaining to children who have hurt or distressed others why their behavior is harmful, and giving them suggestions for making amends to those hurt.
- Encouraging school-age children to discuss their feelings and problems with parents.
- Child rearing practices which are negatively related to the development of empathetic understanding and behavior include:
  - Threats and physical punishments aimed at inducing children to "behave properly."
  - Inconsistent behavior toward children's expression of emotional needs or rejection/withdrawal in response to those needs.

- Home situations in which children's mothers are physically abused by their fathers.
- The provision of extrinsic rewards or bribes aimed at eliciting "good" behavior from children.

## Empathy and Self-Awareness

Empathy builds on self-awareness: the more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we are in reading feelings in others. When people are confused about their own feelings, they will have difficulty recognizing the feelings of others.

Some suggested activities:

1. Self-awareness activities that lead to greater understanding and acceptance of one's being and potentialities.
2. Recognizing, understanding and accepting one's own victimization.
3. Recognizing feelings in self and responding appropriately.
4. Identifying one's needs and making a plan to get them met.
5. Use psychodrama, art, music and games to teach feelings recognition and response.

## Empathy and Feelings

It has been suggested that 90% or more of an emotional message is non-verbal. Empathy is the skill required to communicate non-verbally.

Tests with over 7,000 people in 18 countries indicate the benefits of being able to read feelings from non-verbal cues include:

- ...being better adjusted emotionally.
- ...more popular.
- ...more outgoing.
- ...more sensitive.

In tests with 1,011 children, children who showed an attitude for reading feelings nonverbally:

- ...were among the most popular in their schools.
- ...were the most emotionally stable.
- ...did better in school though their IQ was not higher than children less skilled in reading non-verbal messages.

Some suggested activities:

1. Teach feeling recognition in others and proper ways to respond.
2. Recognition and proper response to the needs of others.
3. Proper ways to communicate feelings and thoughts.

## Empathy and Caring

*The link between empathy and caring - to feel with another is to care.*

The root of caring stems from emotional attunement. Daniel Stern refers to attunement as *A...a process that lets a child know her emotions are met with empathy, accepted, and reciprocated.*

"Parentese" - parent language matching the pitch of the parent's voice to the baby's squeal.

With repeated attunement, around eight months, an infant begins to develop a sense that other people can and will share in her feelings.

When parents fail to show empathy with a particular range of emotions - joys, tears, needing to cuddle - the child begins to avoid expressing and perhaps even feeling those same emotions.

Some suggested activities:

1. Care for plants, pets, objects.
2. Role playing the role of the victim in a simulated reenactment of the hurtful situation.
3. Watch videotapes of victims telling how they felt being a victim.
4. Write about their offense from the victims point of view.
5. Incorporating massage into a "gentle touch" philosophy.

## Empathy and Morality

Martin Hoffman argues that the roots of morality are to be found in empathy, since it is empathizing with the potential victims. Showing this potential distress moves people to act to help them.

Some suggested activities:

1. Identify personal and family morals.
2. Identify personal and family values.

## Empathy and Discipline

NIMH found a large part of the difference in empathic concern had to do with how parents disciplined their children.

Children were more empathic when discipline included calling attention to the distress their misbehavior caused.

Some suggested activities:

1. Teach limitations of corporal punishment on brain development; social and emotional development.
2. Define the concept "discipline."
3. Develop family rules.
4. Teach positive strategies for rewarding and punishing behavior.

5. Empower children and their "will."

## Empathy Instruction for Children & Adults

Empathy instruction and training enhance affective and cognitive empathy in both children and adults, as well as lead to more prosocial behavior. Specific instructional/training components shown to be related to these desirable outcomes include:

1. Training in interpersonal perception and empathetic responding - what empathy is, how it develops, how to recognize and respond to others' emotive states, etc.
2. Activities which focus initially on one's own feelings as a point of departure for relating to the feelings of others.
3. Activities which focus on similarities between oneself and one's feelings and the selves and feelings of others.
4. Role-taking/role-playing activities in which one imagines and acts out the role of another.
5. Sustained practice in imagining/perceiving another's perspective.
6. Exposure to emotionally arousing stimuli, such as portrayal of misfortune, deprivation, or distress.
7. Expressions of positive trait attribution/dispositional praise; that is, reinforcing to children that positive, prosocial traits are part of their nature.
8. Modeling of empathetic behavior by teachers, trainers, experimenters, and other adults with whom the child comes in contact.
9. Activities that focus on the lives of famous empathetic persons (e.g. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa).

Empathy instruction and training have also been shown to lead to increases in personal openness, mindfulness of other's needs in conflict situations, improved teamwork, and greater job satisfaction.