



Prevent Child Abuse Vermont

Empathy: Can it be Learned?

Greetings!

We develop relationships everyday, and whether they are lifelong or just beginning, empathy is one of the most important qualities we can offer one another. It is also a critical element in what makes us healthy human beings. Empathizing allows us to truly share in, and feel, another person's emotions, and that is the key to healthy, positive human relationships.

Empathy is especially important when we interact with children. [Stephen J. Bavolek, Ph.D.](#), author of the Nurturing Parenting

Programs®, says "parents' ability to empathize with the needs of the child is essential in promoting the necessary physical, emotional, intellectual, and social behaviors required for healthy growth and development."

Above all, when we empathize with children, we are recognizing and validating their feelings and needs. When we practice empathy with children, we are in turn teaching e empathy to them. Children who have empathy for others are much less likely to harm others. When human beings act with care and compassion, we are promoting healthy, compassionate relationships for generations to come.

This is an exciting and hopeful part of prevention work. Together we can feel empathy for others, spread compassion, and prevent child abuse!

**For Our Children,
Linda E. Johnson**



What is Empathy?

"Empathy is the ability to imagine yourself in someone else's position... to fully understand another's feelings or motives; to stand in the shoes of another person."

- [Stephen J. Bavolek, PhD](#) Author of the Nurturing Parenting Programs®

"Empathy is a basic "people skill" with two



parts: the capacity to share in another person's feelings and the ability to understand another person's perspective."

- Steve Ness, Family Support Programs Manager, PCAVT

How Do I Empathize?

Pause before reacting

Whether you are struggling to interact with your co-worker, trying to talk to your teenage son, or grocery shopping with an upset toddler, *pause*. Take a few seconds to imagine the other person's viewpoint, and how they might be experiencing the situation. Notice their words, their emotions, and acknowledge their nonverbal expressions. This process gives you a better understanding of the other person, and allows you to share in their feelings. *Pause, make space for their needs, then respond.*

Ask before assuming



Emotions are complex and confusing! While it is easy to assume we know what another person is feeling, keep in mind that each person can experience a situation very differently. To prevent confusion, just ask.

"How are you feeling?"

"What was your day like today?"

"How is your new schedule?"

Asking invites the other person to share. When you ask, you are signaling to a child or a friend that you care about his or her well being, and that you will be an active and compassionate listener.

Build your 'feeling vocabulary'

Pay close attention to your own emotions, and name how you feel. Also note how your body shows those emotions. When you can recognize your *own* feelings, you are more likely to sense and understand the feelings of others.

As you feel something, ask yourself:

What am I feeling?

(Afraid? Bitter? Cheerful? Disappointed? Edgy?)

...)
Why am I feeling this way?
How is my body showing this emotion?
[- The ABCs of Feelings Chart, Legacy Project](#)



How Can I Nurture Empathy in Children?



Encourage

Children begin showing signs of empathy as early as 1 year of age. Often, children will point to a crying baby or walk over to a child who has fallen on the playground. Gestures like these mean children are recognizing the emotions of others. Encourage this process in children, and *encourage them to respond in caring ways*. Children can show they care by bringing over a tissue or Band Aid, asking, "What's wrong?", or asking an adult to help.

Involve

As adults, when a friend loses a loved one, we may bring over a homemade meal or offer to run errands for the family. Involving children in the cooking or shopping teaches them *why* we care for other people, and *how* we show that concern and support through action. By being apart of the activity, children learn how to *feel with and for* another person who is suffering. Together, talk about how a warm meal might help to ease your friends' pain.

Ask

While reading a book or watching a movie with a young child, ask her:

"How does the boy in the story feel?

How can you tell?

What is his face saying?"

These questions help children notice facial cues, recognize feelings, and learn about emotions. When you start this conversation, you are helping a child grow more comfortable



identifying and discussing his or her own emotions, too.

Why is Empathy Important for Prevention?

"If you have empathy for another person,
it becomes a lot harder to mistreat them."

- Steve Ness, Family Support Programs Manager, PCAV

Helpful Resources

- [Visit PCAV Online](#)
- [Call the PCAV Parents' Stress Line: 1-800-CHILDREN in Vermont](#)
- Consider the [Care for Kids: Early Childhood Healthy Sexuality and Abuse Prevention](#) curriculum in your early childhood program.
- Learn to nurture empathy among your family members: Contact PCAV for [Nurturing Parenting Programs and Circle of Parents Support Groups](#)
- Read about parenting with empathy in [The Art and Science of Raising Healthy Children](#) by Stephen J. Bavolek, Ph.D.
- Review [The ABCs of Feelings](#) Chart
- Listen to NPR's Radiolab episode: [Kiddie Morality](#)

