

# Teaching empathy: Evidence-based tips for fostering empathy in children



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Teaching empathy? This might sound strange if you think of empathy as a talent--something we either have or lack.

But research also suggests that [empathy is a complex phenomenon](#) involving several component skills:

- A sense of self-awareness and the ability to distinguish one's own feelings from the feelings of others.
- Taking another person's perspective (or, alternatively, "putting oneself in another person's shoes").
- Being able to regulate one's own emotional responses.

These skills might seem like standard-issue, grown-up social skills, and indeed they are.

However, even adults can have trouble with these abilities. For instance, some adults would shrink from offering a wounded person first aid, not because they are callous, but because they have trouble coping with their own emotional reactions to the other person's plight.

So I don't think of empathy as something you either have or lack. There are degrees of empathy, and, with practice and an understanding of psychology, we can probably develop stronger empathic skills.

Here are some tips for teaching empathy--tips inspired by scientific research.

## **Teaching empathy tip #1: Address your child's own needs, and teach him how to "bounce back" from distress**

Studies suggest that kids are more likely to develop a strong sense of empathy when their own emotional needs are being met at home (Barnett 1987).

When kids have secure attachment relationships (so that they know they can count on their caregivers for emotional and physical support) they are more likely to show sympathy and offer help to other kids in distress (Waters et al 1979; Kestenbaum et al 1989).

Other research indicates that kids are more likely to show empathic concern for others if they have parents who help them cope with negative emotions in a sympathetic, problem-solving-oriented way. For references, see this article on the [case for teaching empathy](#).

## **Teaching empathy tip #2: Be a "mind-minded" parent**

### **Treat children as individuals with minds of their own, and talk to them about the ways that our feelings influence our behavior**

Observational studies reveal a link between parenting and "theory of mind"—i.e., what kids understand about the goals, desires, and beliefs of other people.

Parents who are "mind-minded" treat their offspring (no matter how young) as individuals with minds of their own. They also talk to their children about emotional and mental states, and discuss the ways that our beliefs, desires, and emotions motivate behavior. For more information about these studies—and an experiment illustrating the importance of "mental state talk"—see this article on [mind-mindedness](#).

## **Teaching empathy tip #3: Seize everyday opportunities to model—and induce—sympathetic feelings for other people**

By modeling empathic behavior—and pointing out situations that call for empathy—parents can generate sympathetic responses in their kids. For example, if you and your child see someone being victimized (in real life, on TV, or in a book), talk with your child about how that person must feel (Pizarro and Salovey 2002).

## **Teaching empathy tip #4: Help kids discover what they have in common with other people**

Experiments suggest that kids are more likely to feel empathy for individuals who are familiar and/or similar to them (e.g., Zahn-Waxler et al 1984; Smith 1988). Kids may also find it easier to empathize with people who they've shared unpleasant experiences with (Murphy 1937).

So it's probably helpful to make kids aware of the similarities they may share with other people. The more we can humanize the victims of distress or tragedy, the better kids will be able to respond with empathy.

## **Teaching empathy tip #5: Teach kids about the hot-cold empathy gap**

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to appreciate the power of a food craving when you aren't hungry? This is what researchers call the ["hot-cold empathy gap,"](#) and it appears to be a universal problem. When people are feeling cool and collected, they underestimate how compelling emotionally or physiologically "hot" states—like hunger—can be.

Conversely, people in the grip of "hot" states often underestimate how much their current perceptions are influenced by their situation.

The hot-cold empathy gap leads to mistakes in judgment and failures of empathy. But once we understand how the hot-cold empathy gap works, we can use it to teach empathy.

For example, we can use moments of discomfort as opportunities to induce empathy for others:

- Did your child get the brush-off from the school snob? You might start a conversation about the experiences of other victims...and note how these episodes can help us avoid acting like snobs ourselves.
- Coping with a miserable family car trip? Ask kids to imagine how their ancestors felt during arduous, dusty, treks in horse-powered carts and wagons.

We might also help kids teaching them about the hot-cold empathy gap.

For instance, kids may have unrealistic attitudes about their ability to control their urges and emotions—and keep making mistakes as a result.

Research on the empathy gap suggests that trying to resist temptation may be less effective than simply avoiding situations that give rise to temptation.

So some kids need to learn that self-control isn't just about being strong. It's also about being smart. If you need to get your homework done, keep distractions—like that cell phone—out of sight. If your peers are pressuring you act to uncharitably towards "uncool" kids, maybe you should spend your time with other, more pleasant, people.

## **Teaching empathy tip #6: Help kids explore other roles and perspectives**

As noted in the introduction, empathy involves perspective-taking. What is the world like when experienced from another person's point of view?

Stories—from books or television—are opportunities for kids to practice perspective-taking skills. What do the characters think, believe, want, or feel? And how do we know it?

When families discuss these questions, kids may learn a lot about the way other people's minds work (Dunn et al 2001). In one experimental study, 110 school kids (aged 7 years) were enrolled in a program of reading. Some students were randomly assigned to engage in conversations about the emotional content of the stories they read. Others were asked only to produce drawings about the stories. After two months, the kids in the conversation group showed greater advances in emotion comprehension, theory of mind, and empathy, and the positive outcomes "remained stable for 6 months" (Ornaghi et al 2014).

Other research suggests you don't even have to talk to boost your empathic skills, not if the material you read is sufficiently stimulating. When David Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) assigned young adults to read literary fiction -- novels that challenged readers to analyze the psychology of characters -- participants showed temporary improvements in their ability to "read" the minds of others.

And don't dismiss the usefulness of role-playing games. In an elaborate role-playing trial, researchers asked young, healthy medical students to simulate the difficulties of old age. For example, students wore goggles covered with transparent tape to simulate the effects of cataracts, and heavy rubber gloves to experience poor motor control. After the experiment, the students showed greater empathy towards the elderly (Varkey et al 2006).

**Teaching empathy tip #7: Show kids how to “make a face” while they try to imagine how someone else feels.**



Suppose I tell you to make a sad face. It's just play acting, right?

Not really.

**Experiments show that simply “going through the motions” of making a facial expression can make us experience the associated emotion.**

And it's not “just our imagination” (whatever that phrase means). When researchers have asked people to imitate certain facial expressions, they have detected changes in brain activity that are characteristic of the corresponding emotions. People also experience changes in heart rate, skin conductance, body temperature (for a concise summary, see Decety and Jackson 2004).

So it seems likely that we can “boost” our empathic powers by imitating the facial expressions of people we want to empathize with.

Pretty cool, huh? And it's not a new idea. As neuroscientists Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson point out, this method was suggested by Edgar Allen Poe in his short story *the Purloined Letter*.

## **Teaching empathy tip #8: Help kids develop a sense of morality that depends on internal self-control, not on rewards or punishments**

Kids are capable of being spontaneously helpful and sympathetic. But experimental studies have shown that kids become less likely to [help others if they are given material rewards for doing so.](#)

Other research has shown that kids are more likely to develop an internal sense of right and wrong if they are raised with [authoritative](#) , inductive discipline--an approach that emphasizes rational explanations and moral consequences, not arbitrary rules and heavy-handed punishments.

For instance, kids are more likely to internalize moral principles when their parents talk to them about how wrong-doing affects other people--inducing empathy and feelings of guilt (Hoffman and Saltzein 1967).

## **Teaching empathy tip #9: Teach (older) kids about mechanisms of moral disengagement**

Research has demonstrated that average, well-adjusted people can be persuaded to harm others—even torture them—as long as they are provided with the right rationale.

In a famous series of experiments developed by Stanley Milgram of Yale University, subjects were told that they were participating in a "learning experiment" that required them to administer painful electric shocks to another person (Milgram 1963).

The "experiment" was a fake—dressed up with plausible props and an actor who pretended to be in pain after the study participants pressed a button. But the participants were fooled and—urged on by an authoritative man in a white lab coat—they dutifully administered shocks to the screaming "victim." In fact, almost 65% of participants continued to press the button even after the "victim" had appeared to fall unconscious (Milgram 1963).

These people weren't psychopaths. They were ordinary people exposed to social pressure from a plausible authority figure. With the right rationalizations,

otherwise decent people can disengage their moral responses. And it's not just an adult phenomenon. Kids can do it, too.

I think it's a good idea for older kids to learn about Milgram's research and about the kinds of rationalizations that people use to excuse callous or cruel behavior. For more information, check out this article on [mechanisms of moral disengagement](#).

## **Teaching empathy tip #10: Inspire good feelings (and boost oxytocin levels) through pleasant social interactions and physical affection**

An interesting experiment suggests that higher levels of oxytocin can help people better "decode" the emotional meanings of facial expressions. Researchers had 30 young adult males inhale oxytocin (the "cuddle" hormone) and then examine photographs of other people's eyes. Compared to men given a placebo, the oxytocin men were better at interpreting the emotions of the people in the photographs (Domes et al 2006).

So perhaps kids will find it easier to understand the emotional signals of others if they are well-supplied with their own, naturally-produced oxytocin. Oxytocin is released when people experience pleasant touching (like hugs and massage). It's also produced when people engage in pleasant social interactions (Uvnäs-Moberg 2003).

## **Other helpful ideas for teaching empathy**

For related information, check out these [research-inspired social skills activities for children and teenagers](http://www.parentingscience.com/teaching-empathy-tips.html). @ <http://www.parentingscience.com/teaching-empathy-tips.html>

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