



Empathy Summary

Why Empathy?

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you play an essential role in your child's success. There are intentional ways to grow a healthy parent-child relationship while growing empathy in your child so that they can work to develop healthy relationships and prepare for future success in school and life.

Tip These steps are best done when you and your child are not tired or in a rush

Tip Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parenting relationship will support these steps.

Step 1. Getting to Know and Understand Your Child's Input

- Consider how your child reacts when they are upset, angry, or frustrated.
 - How do they show you? Children at this age may cry, yell, hit, bite, or throw things. They can be soothed by cuddling and rocking and are learning to self-soothe when upset.
 - If a child is crying, offer to hold them or provide comfort items like a favorite teddy bear or a blanket. Do not attempt to talk anything through when a child is highly upset. Focus on calming down first.
 - If a child hits or bites in anger or frustration, stop and say, *"Ouch. That hurts my arm, and it makes me feel sad"* or *"I see you are frustrated."*
- Consider how your child reacts when they are happy or excited. How do they show you? Children at this age clap their hands, imitate others, smile, squeal, and laugh when they are happy or excited.
- Consider how your child reacts when they are scared. How do they show you? Children at this age are more aware of their surroundings, which can make them afraid of new things or sounds. They may cry, withdraw, or hide.
- Each time your child expresses any big feeling, be sure and name the feeling: *"You seem angry"* or *"You seem happy."* This builds their feelings vocabulary adding to their self-awareness and ability to manage their feelings.

As you react to your child in ways that soothe, you will find they will feel a greater sense of your understanding and responsiveness so that your interactions become more two-way instead of one-way.

Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Model empathy while interacting with your child. Modeling empathy can be one of the greatest teaching tools.
 - Share the focus. As you spend time with your child, follow their lead.
 - Notice gestures and listen for thought and feeling: *"I noticed your face is red and your shoulders are tense. You look angry."*
 - Children require your attention to thrive. So, why not build a special time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child has to tell you?
- Read together. Use reading time and select a book of faces to help your child learn to identify the different emotions of other children. Point out how you can tell what each child is feeling and practice recreating those cues with your child.
- Make your thinking and feelings explicit. Talk about how you are feeling, why you are feeling it, and what signs you are giving particularly when it's not a comfortable feeling. *"I am feeling happy right now because I really like to dance with you to the music. Can you tell? I am smiling."*
- Talk aloud about the ways in which you respond to your own big feelings: *"I'm gonna take a few deep breaths before trying again and see if that helps."*
- Develop empathetic thinking by talking about how others might be feeling.
 - *"Your friend is crying. I think she is feeling sad."*
 - *"Do you see the little boy over there? His face is frowning. Let's go over and see if he needs our help."*

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Allow your child the chance to interact with new people of all ages with you close by.
- Create a consistent routine with regular nap times, play times, and meals. Routines create a sense of safety and security so that your child can focus on learning and growing.
- Narrate your day as you go about your household chores or run errands in your community. This narration will offer your child a sense of connection and offer practice in some of the building blocks of empathy such as listening to your thoughts and feelings.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Learn about your child's development. Each new age presents different challenges. Being informed about your child's developmental milestones offers you empathy and patience.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw she was sad."*
- When you can see your child is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your child's ability to face the unfamiliar. In a gentle, comforting voice, you can say, *"This is my friend. He is very kind."*

- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. *“You seem worried about going into this new store. I’ll hold you so you feel more confident.”* Offering comfort when facing new situations can help your child gain a sense of security and face them rather than backing away.
 - You can also offer comfort items to help your child face new challenges. *“Would your bear help you feel better?”*

Step 5. Recognize and Celebrate

- Smile at your child.
- Make eye contact.
- Use caring facial expressions.
- Be physically gentle and caring with your child.
- Recognize steps along the way. Each little discovery about another person’s thoughts and feelings is an exciting step forward.
- Build celebrations into your everyday routines. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

Tip This year is filled with amazing changes -- and not just for your child. Don’t forget to recognize and celebrate your own development and milestones as a parent.

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