



Empathy Summary

Why Empathy?

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you play an essential role in your child's success. Your child's secure and trusting connection with you is pivotal to their emerging empathy for others. You can support their growing empathy as you interact and share love and conversation.

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. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Each time there is an opportunity, share how you are feeling and ask your child how they feel: *"I am getting hungry; are you feeling hungry?"*
 - For example, if your child is making a disagreeable facial expression, notice and name the feeling. *"I noticed that when I told you to share your toy with your friend, your eyebrows squished down and there was a line in your forehead. Were you feeling mad?"*
- Practicing naming feelings will enable your child to identify their own feelings as well as others and seek support when they need it. This can help reduce the length and strength of tantrums as your child gains skills in understanding their feelings.
- When reading books, point out feelings. *"I noticed the duck in this story felt sad when he couldn't have another cookie"* or *"When the little bear shared his toy with his friend, he looked happy. He had a smile on his face."*

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 you are smiling. You look happy."*

- 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 and “pretend play” together.
 - Use reading time and select a book of faces to help your child learn to identify the different feelings of other children. Point out how you can tell what each child is feeling and practice recreating those cues with your child.
 - After reading a story together, act out the plot and use feeling words and expressions to match how the characters were feeling throughout the story.
- 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 frustrated right now because I cannot get the seat belt to work. Can you tell? My face is red and getting hot.”*
- 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.”*
- Each time there is an opportunity, share with your child how others may be feeling: *“Her face is frowning. Do you think she’s feeling sad?”*

Trap Don’t tell your child what they feel; ask instead. Two-year-olds are striving for independence and may create a power struggle if you are too direct about their thoughts and feelings. You might say, *“You look angry. Is that right?”*

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

- Whenever you see another child become emotional, use it as an opportunity to figure out the feeling together. *“What do you think he’s feeling now? Why do you think that?”* Offer support to help them be successful. *“I think he might be sad because he fell down. What do you think?”*
- Read together. Reflect on the story, and you’ll take the learning opportunity one step further. *“Do you think Little Red Riding Hood was excited to go to Grandma’s House?”*
- Play games to practice feelings. Playing games like *Going on a Bear Hunt* allows you and your child to try on different feelings and practice facial expressions, tone of voice, and movements that might match those feelings.
- Initially, practice may require more teaching. However, avoid taking over and telling your child what others are thinking and feeling without allowing them the practice of guessing.

Trap Resist judging other children who hurt your child either with words or actions. Most often, we don’t know the whole story of the child who is lashing out, but we do know one thing for certain: that child is hurting. So, express that you don’t see the whole picture. *“Children only say hurtful words when they are hurt themselves. Do you know why she would be hurting?”* Prompt compassionate thinking. Then, coach your child how to respond in ways that do no harm to self or another: *“Next time, could you move away or ask her to stop?”*

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

- Use "Show me..." statements like *"Show me how you can help your sister when she is feeling sad."*
- Recognize effort by using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw she was sad and gave her a toy to help her feel better. That was kind of you."*
- When you can see your child is frustrated or feeling incapable, proactively remind your child of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child's ear, *"Remember how you enjoyed playing at the park with your new friend yesterday. You might enjoy doing it again today. I will stand beside you."*
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. *"It seems like you got mad about having to take turns sharing the toy. You just stopped playing. Is that right? Did it help you feel better?"* Be sure to reflect on the outcomes of their choices.

Trap Don't fix problems between your child and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child. Instead ask them good questions about how they can get their own needs met (*"Could you hug a teddy bear and then go back to playing?"*) and how they can understand and support each other's feelings and start to feel better.

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize when your child's guess about another child's thoughts or feelings are confirmed. *"We guessed your friend Sam was tired because he was quiet and looking away. He just laid down on the mat. You were correct."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors.
- Build celebrations into your routine. If your child finds a way to feel better, recognize their effort. Include hugs, high fives, and fist bumps in your ways to appreciate one another.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Empathy Summary*. Age 2. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.