



Empathy Summary

Why Empathy?

Your child's/teen's ability to understand the experience of others and to make meaningful connections with people in their life is based on their capacity for empathy. The ability to understand what someone else is feeling requires that your child/teen is able to first identify and recognize their own feelings, which takes practice. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you can nurture, model, and teach the skills of empathy for your child/teen.

Step 1. Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Ask your child/teen to tune in and try to identify their feelings. *"What do you think you are feeling right now? How does your body feel? Hot in the face? Sick in your stomach?"*
- Ask your child/teen to make a plan for pausing in the heat of a big emotion. *"What could you do when you are upset to help you remember to stop and name your feeling?"*
- Refer to a feelings chart as you learn together the physical and facial expressions of different feelings.
- Ask about what it means to truly focus on a friend in order to understand and show empathy.
- When reading books or watching movies with your child/teen, discuss the characters' thoughts and feelings.
- Ask about your child's/teen's feelings when they are viewing social media. And ask them how they think other people feel when they get comments, judgments, or criticism.

Discuss challenges. In Step 2, plan to teach what they can do instead.

Tip It is important to withhold judgment when your child/teen expresses their feelings. You want to encourage that all feelings are valid, and empathy means believing how another person says they are feeling even if their feelings do not align with how you have felt during a similar experience. This can be challenging for parents when their child/teen may have a big emotional reaction to something that seems small to an adult; validating their big feeling is the first step in helping them cope with their feelings and recognize the feelings of those around them.

Tip Because children/teens are curious about others, any social situations, news stories, or community problems can be opportunities to raise good questions about others' thoughts and feelings for important practice with the complexities of empathic thinking.

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

- Set the rule or expectation in your household: **Feelings are always right and okay!**
- Do daily feelings check-ins. Do not judge but care for each other when challenging feelings are expressed.
- Model healthy feelings identification and expression. If you experience a big emotion, it is healthy to give yourself a moment to stop and truly identify your own feeling.
- Notice facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language in others that indicate feelings.
- Brainstorm ways you can offer help or show care to someone in pain or distress.
- Encourage empathic thinking even when it's most challenging for your child/teen.
- Practice and support inclusion.
- Post your feelings chart somewhere visible as a reminder!

Trap Don't tell your child/teen what they feel; ask instead. You want to empower children/teens with their own feelings vocabulary. You might say, *"You look sad and frustrated. Is that right?"*

Tip Remember communication is 90% body language and emotional signals and only 10% verbal. You can practice reading others' body language while watching a movie together or while people watching at a busy airport or mall.

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

- Discuss characters' motivation for choices and their feelings when conflicts or problems occur in stories when you read or watch a movie together.
- Practice empathy skills when your child/teen comes home with a story about friends or peers at school. *"What do you think they were feeling? Thinking? And what could make things better? What were you thinking and feeling when that happened? Is there any harm that needs to be repaired between you and another peer?"*

Trap Resist judging other children/teens who hurt your child/teen either with words or actions. Most often, you may not know the whole story of the child/teen who is lashing out, but you do know one thing for certain – that child/teen is hurting. First, listen to the feelings of your child/teen and express care. Then, express that it's impossible to see the whole picture. *"Children/teens only say hurtful words when they feel hurt themselves. Do you know why they might be hurting?"* Prompt compassionate thinking. Then coach your child/teen how to respond in ways that do no harm to self or another. *"Next time, could you move away or ask them to stop?"*

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

- Use "Tell me..." statements to support their skills: *"Tell me what you understand about how your sister is feeling."*
- Proactively remind your child/teen of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child's/teen's ear, *"Remember how you gave your sister a hug to feel better the other day? How could you do the same for your brother who is having a hard day today?"*
- Recognize effort by using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw they were sad and shared your favorite snack to help them feel better. That was kind of you."*
- Actively reflect on how your child/teen is feeling when approaching challenges. *"How did things go during lunch? How have you been feeling?"*

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

- Recognize small steps along the way. Each little discovery about another person's thoughts and feelings is an exciting step forward.
- Recognize when your child/teen identifies the thoughts or feelings of another child/teen.
- Build celebrations into your routine.

Trap Don't fix problems between your child/teen and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child/teen. Instead ask them questions about how they can get their own needs met (*"Could you take a break? Maybe sit somewhere else for lunch for a day or two?"*) and about how they can understand each other's feelings and start to feel better.

Trap Avoid bribes. A bribe is a promise for a behavior, while praise is special attention after the behavior. While bribes may work in the short term, praise grows lasting motivation for good behavior and effort. For example, instead of saying, *"If you share your snack with your sister, I will let you have more time with your friends"* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *"You shared your snack with your sister. I really appreciate that!"*

Celebrate yourself for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your child's/teen's success today and in their future!

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