



Empathy Summary

Why Empathy?

Your 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 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 teen.

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

- Ask your 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 identify your feeling?"*
- Practice reading social cues. Each time there is an opportunity, ask your teen, *"How do you think your friend feels?"*
- 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.
- Discuss noticing pain and what to do when you feel another's pain. When your teen shares stories of friends or peers they know who are experiencing pain, ask about it.
- Ask about your 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 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 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 teens are curious about others, any social situations, news stories, or community problems are opportunities to raise good questions about others' thoughts and feelings for important practice with the complexities of empathic thinking. Raise these conversations regularly to offer practice with a variety of people and situations.

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 suffering.
- Encourage empathic thinking even when it's most challenging for your teen.
- Discuss the needs and challenges of the bigger world. Empathy and developing a sense of purpose in life require teens to have beyond-the-self interests.
- Create opportunities with your teen to experience diversity.
- Participate as a family in service. Consider what community issues you want to address and find ways to volunteer together.

Trap Don't tell your teen what they feel; ask instead. You want to empower teens with their chance to articulate what's in their hearts. Be sure to ask about a mix of emotions if you are perceiving them. 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

- Reflect on book and movie characters. When reading books or watching movies with your teen, discuss the characters' thoughts and feelings.
- Offer empathic listening (reflecting back feelings and thoughts) when your teen comes to you with a social problem. Resist fixing the problem or offering solutions but instead ask questions to prompt their thinking about how best to handle the situation and relationship.
- When the whole family is together talking, try to predict one another's feelings and see how accurate you can be.

Trap Resist judging other teens who hurt your teen either with words or actions. Most often, you don't know the whole story of the one who is lashing out, but you do know one thing for certain – that individual is hurting. First, listen to the feelings of your teen and express care. Then, relay that it's impossible to know everything affecting the one lashing out. *"People tend to say hurtful words when they are hurt themselves. Do you know why they might be hurting?"* Prompt compassionate thinking. Then coach your 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? Good. Try it out."*

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

- Use "Tell me..." statements and ask them to demonstrate empathy. You could say, *"Tell me what you understand about how your sister is feeling."*
- Proactively remind your teen of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, you could whisper, *"Remember how you left your friend a note in their locker to help them feel better the other day? What could you do for your brother who is having a hard day today?"*
- Recognize effort by using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw they needed a ride and offered to drop them off. That was kind of you."*

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 teen identifies the thoughts or feelings of another. *"We thought your friend might be feeling annoyed when they got quiet. You were correct."*
- Build celebrations into your routine.

Trap Don't fix problems between your teen and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for them. 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 do the dishes, you may have a friend over after dinner"* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *"Thanks for doing the dishes again tonight. I know it's your day for dishes, but you should know I really appreciate it!"*

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

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