



# Empathy Summary

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## Why Empathy?

Your child'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 first is able to identify and recognize their own feelings, which takes practice.

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

- Ask your child 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 tummy?"*
- Create a plan for your child to pause in the midst of big feelings so that they can recognize and name those feelings. *"What could you do when you are upset to help you remember to stop and name your feeling?"*
- Ask your child questions about their own feelings; then shift questions to how they perceive others might be feeling. *"How do you think the other child feels? What is telling you that?"*

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

**Tip** Because children 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.
- Practice reading others' body language while watching a movie together.
- 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.
- Practice and support inclusion.
- Post your feelings chart somewhere visible as a reminder!

**Trap** Don't tell your child what they feel; ask instead. You want to empower children with their own feelings vocabulary. You might say, *"You look sad. 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

- Respectfully mirror your child's facial expressions, tones of speech, and attitudes when you are communicating with them, and encourage them to mirror the things they see in you back to you. Mirroring shows that you are paying attention to and understanding each other's thoughts and feelings.
- Discuss characters' motivation for choices and their feelings when conflicts or problems occur in stories when you read together.
- Practice empathy skills when your child 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?"*
- Play family guessing games like "Guess the emotion I am making with my face." Take turns making different emotional faces and guessing the feeling being portrayed.

**Trap** Resist judging other children who hurt your child either with words or actions. Most often, you may not know the whole story of the child who is lashing out, but you do know one thing for certain – that child is hurting. First, listen to the feelings of your child and express care. Then, express that it's impossible to see the whole picture. *"Children only say hurtful words when they feel hurt themselves. Do you know why they might 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 them to stop? Good. Let's practice."*

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

- Use "Tell me..." statements to support their skills: *"Tell me what you understand about how your sister is feeling. What is something you can do for her to show you understand and are here for her?"*
- Proactively remind your child of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child'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 is feeling when approaching challenges. *“How have you been feeling during recess?”*

## 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 identifies the thoughts or feelings of another child.
- Build celebrations into your routine.

**Trap** Don’t fix problems between your child and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child. Instead ask them questions about how they can get their own needs met (*“Could you take a break, get a drink of water, and then go back to playing?”*) 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 go check on your sister, I will let you have more time to play at the park”* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *“You noticed your sister was feeling sad and went to check on her. 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 success today and in their future!

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