

Tip Sheets

Development of Empathy

Empathy

Empathy is an important emotional milestone for young children. It is developed gradually through nurturing and consistent caregiving that begins with a secure attachment. Empathy is complex; it includes the ability to identify and name one's own emotions, take another's perspective, and to feel with that person in a similar way.

Infants and Toddlers

- The foundations of empathy are being formed at this age.
- When an infant is responded to with consistent and nurturing care, she begins to make important connections about how her needs are met.
- When an infant is soothed by his primary caregiver, he learns to soothe himself and later comfort others.
- Infants will connect emotionally with their caregivers which is believed to be a foundation for later development of concern for others.
- Toddlers will copy their peer's reactions by crying when a friend is crying. This sensitivity sets the stage for the development of empathetic skills.
- True empathy means a child needs to understand their self as distinct from other people (self-awareness). This strengthens toward the end of age two.

Preschoolers

- 3- and 4-year-olds begin to develop empathy skills as their expressive and receptive language skills increase.
- As they have opportunities to interact with peers, they learn about different feelings and emotions.
- They may understand emotions of peers but not how to appropriately react to those emotions.
- Adults need to connect words to feelings so preschoolers can communicate with words instead of hitting or biting.

Kindergarten and 1st Graders

- Empathy increases over the elementary years as children understand a broader range of feelings and cues when assessing each other's feelings.
- As 5- and 6-year-olds become more aware of their own emotions, they see those same feelings in others and expand their "emotional" vocabulary.
- They begin to reconcile conflicting cues when considering peer emotions.



Tips for Promoting Empathy

Infants and Toddlers

- Share your own emotions in dramatic ways so the children notice and are curious. Use one word to name an emotion, such as “sad.”
- When a child is happy, sad, angry, etc., help her to understand those emotions by labeling them. “You’re happy!”
- Use responsive caregiving with infants and toddlers in order to build securely attached relationships.

Preschoolers

- At this age, reading books about feelings as children share their own emotions increases their emotional literacy.
- Encourage children when they express their feelings. Have a safe environment for all feelings.
- When preschoolers are engaged in a conflict use the opportunity to point out the facial expressions and actions of their peers. Talk about what they might be feeling and why. Discuss ways to help them feel better.
- Use small group settings to talk about feelings. Play games that use photos of children experiencing different feelings or a feelings cube. Have children share what makes them feel a feeling, such as being sad, and what they do when they feel that way. This promotes self-awareness.
- Throughout your day be vocal about your own changing feelings, “I am so excited about our next story!” “I feel sad when I hear someone crying. It makes me want to see what is making them sad and see if they need help.” “Your big smile is making me smile too! You must be happy about something. I wonder what is making you happy.”

Kindergarten and 1st Grade

- Ask questions when reading stories that point out expressions of the characters, predict how an experience may make someone feel and share what to do when someone feels or acts that way.
- Teachers can promote empathy by being empathetic! Share your own feelings in words and stories to help children make these connections.
- Create a specific area on a bookshelf that is accessible and houses books about strong emotions or simple picture books that discuss feelings. Refer to the various resources throughout the day when things come up that deal with understanding the feelings and needs of others.
- Keep your environment rich in photos, books and toys that promote the development of emotional literacy.

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