

# How to Cultivate Empathy in Your Child

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes is at the core of empathy. Here's how to foster empathy in your children, plus what it means to their mental health.

By Stacey Winconeck

Our children are always watching us. They look to us for social cues, listen to the words we use to react to our partner, family and friends — and much more. That's why teaching your child about empathy starts at home. "They look at us and they begin to connect with emotions through our reactions and responses," says Karen Johnson, a psychologist and counselor at Transcendence Behavioral Health in Plymouth. "Kids will look at your face and look at your eyes and they imitate."

If you're quick to dismiss another person's expression of anger, sadness or even excitement, your child will learn to do the same and that cycle of non-empathy will continue. It's something Johnson witnessed first-hand while working as an educator in Detroit and Ferndale for 18 years prior to changing her career path. In fact, what fueled her to switch careers was the hope that she could break the cycle.

Teaching children about empathy is one way to help them connect to others in childhood and beyond.

"If empathy isn't cultivated, they are just toughened up and they learn to cope and then they will not show empathy for others," Johnson says.

Having empathy for others boasts benefits to your child's mental health, as well.

"Research shows that it builds security, (children) are able to have stronger and better relationships with their friends because they can connect with them," she says.

There are many ways to show your children what empathy looks like. Here, Johnson offers tips for parents.

## Model the way

Caring and connection — these are two words Johnson uses to describe empathy.

"Being able to connect with the emotions that another is feeling. If someone is cold and you're warm, if you have ever been cold, you know what it feels like to experience being cold," she says, so you should be able to understand and ultimately empathize with how that person is feeling.

When someone says, "put yourself in my shoes," they want you to understand and care about their feelings. If you're able to do that, you're showing empathy — and if you're doing that in front of your children, you're already a step ahead.

Leading by example is the perfect way to teach your children about empathy, but it's just the beginning.

"The empathy on the child level is to be able to get them to connect with how someone else is feeling, and how parents can do that is by the love that they show their children," she says.

Validate your child's feelings versus trying to heal. As parent we want to fix things, she says, but truly understanding and letting your child know you understand them, is integral. Let your children share those feelings with you. Avoid saying things like "get over it."

If you're going to tell your child to apologize or say they are sorry to a classmate or friend, for example, make sure they know why they are saying they are sorry. Simply telling your child to apologize doesn't teach them empathy.

"Let them connect with the reason,"

Johnson says. "You're saying sorry for pushing Heather because that made Heather's stomach hurt. Have you ever had a tummy ache?" versus just making them apologize because that doesn't teach them empathy just having them apologize," Johnson says.

## Explore emotions

Sadness, happiness, fear, anger, nervousness — whatever the emotion may be, teach your child about the array of emotions he or she can experience.

"Let them have a strong base of ways that they can possibly feel," Johnson says.

If they are feeling angry or frustrated, do not make them feel guilty, she adds. It's OK to feel these emotions. If your child is feeling upset, take a cue from PBS character Daniel Tiger and, "take a deep breath and count to four." Teach children to stop and breathe before reacting in anger. It's one healthy way to deal with a negative emotion.

Read with your kids as another way to teach them about emotions, Johnson adds. *Many Days Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss and *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr are two books that can help parents explain different feelings.

Sit down and watch TV with your kiddos. Be mindful of the television programs they are watching and see what empathy, if any, is being depicted. Then, you can discuss it with your child.

Ultimately, it starts and ends with you. "I would say, parents (should) reevaluate and re-assess their level of empathy for others because it's what you're teaching your kids."

## LEADING BY EXAMPLE

It starts with us. As parents, we set the example for our children, so if we want them to grow to be empathic adults, we must start showing them empathy in childhood. By modeling empathy, taking time to listen and understand our child's feelings and explaining different emotions, we can help children grow to be caring, connected adults with strong personal and professional relationships. In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, a local expert offers advice on how to cultivate empathy in your child — and just what it means to his or her overall mental health.

We hope you find this information helpful and you'll share this advice with others in your parenting tribe.



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