

7 do's and don'ts to help your family build empathy skills



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Does your child cry when you cry? Does she want to give a dollar to every homeless man with a cardboard sign? Or do you have the kid who noticed neither the tears nor the homeless person? The first child may have a deep natural capacity for empathy. The second child, not so much. Empathy is at the root of what it means to be human, experts say, and it's at the core of all good relationships — personal and professional. Some children may naturally have more of it than others. But not to worry, empathy — the ability to understand and share the feelings of another — is something that experts say can be enhanced, learned, and practiced.

But that basic dictionary definition of empathy misses the depth that leads to change and creates good relationships, says empathy and parenting expert Richard Weissbourd, co-director of the Making Caring Common project at Harvard University. Beyond perspective taking, empathy can dissolve boundaries and prompt action, he says.

Could a generation of children raised to be empathic change the world? Imagine a political landscape lead by empathic people. No hunger, homelessness, or war. Imagine schools filled with empathic people. No bullying. Not to mention, homes with empathic foundations will experience less conflict.

How do you foster an empathic environment at home? Well, to teach empathy you have to show empathy. A “do as I say, not as I do” style won’t cut it. Your kids are watching you — and they copy you. Try these suggestions to strengthen your child’s empathic muscles and avoid habits that destroy an empathic mindset.

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Model caring for others

Show concern for people outside your circle, as well as your family, friends, and associates. Give the letter carrier a bottle of water on a hot day. Join the street musician in a song you know. Talk to strangers in the grocery store line.

Don’t judge others. Don’t call people names. Don’t be rude and disrespectful. Don’t sit around talking smack about the neighbors, especially the ones you also hang out and barbecue with.

Model good listening skills

Here’s how:

- Actually listen.
- Let your body language and facial expressions convey that you are listening by nodding and offering plenty of uh-huhs.
- Respond to what people say.

Don’t formulate your response while someone else is still talking. And don’t

interrupt.

Be forgiving

Remember, forgiveness is not about the other person. It's about how you act and feel. Let your child see you being the bigger person.

Don't hold grudges, seek revenge, be mean or unkind, or give "the silent treatment" to loved ones.

Challenge prejudices and stereotypes

Encourage your kids to be inclusive, so that means you need to be inclusive, too. What's your group of friends like? It's important to let your child talk about race, prejudice, and stereotypes.

Don't be afraid to talk to your kid about race, inequality, and discrimination. If you see incidents of prejudices or stereotyping, don't let them pass without comment.

Help them learn to recognize, express, and manage their feelings

Your child's other feelings could be getting in the way of their ability to feel empathy, Weissbourd says. Help your child learn to identify other people's feelings when reading books or watching movies or TV shows.

Don't shut your child down with phrases like, "Stop. I don't want to hear it" or "Big girls don't cry." Don't discount or disregard their feelings. Don't ignore emotions they are having a difficult time expressing or are attempting to suppress.

Encourage responsibility

Let your children participate in the home. Have family meetings where you listen to their concerns and get their opinion. Give them chores and teach

them life skills. Let them join you in your community and volunteer activities.

Don't discourage their desire to help others, even strangers — while teaching a healthy balance between kindness and safety.

Immerse them in literature and art

Surround your child with diverse books and music from other cultures. The more, the merrier! Pictures, books, and music allow kids to vicariously experience another person's world. Plus, they provide easy prompts for further discussion.

Don't discourage imagination.