



Do You Know How I Feel? Empathy and the Young Child

By Sandra Crosser, Ph.D.

One baby begins to cry and soon a chorus of cries echoes throughout the hospital nursery.... A mom cradles her aching head in her arms and her two-year-old son offers her his blanket.... Jennifer becomes distressed when her mother drops her off at child care while three-year-old Miranda watches from a distance, becomes teary-eyed, and begins to suck her thumb.... Seven-year-old Kara's little brother falls and bumps his knee. She kisses it and gives him a hug. Empathy. It develops slowly, over time, as morality emerges.

Morality emerges as a child begins to think about right and wrong, identify with the feelings of others, and act in prosocial ways. While thinking, feeling, and acting are all aspects of morality, this article focuses on feeling and ways caregivers can promote the development of empathy in young children.

Empathy, Infants, and Toddlers

Empathy is important to moral development because it allows us to identify with the entire range of emotions experienced by others. The ability to empathize develops gradually and appears to be a necessary prerequisite to acting in helpful ways (Staub, 1995).

While it is true that infants appear to empathize when they cry in response to the cries of other infants, it has been argued that such responses only indicate personal distress rather than concern for others. The infant does not differentiate himself from others and cannot identify the source of the cries he hears (Hoffman, 1979). Older infants may seek adult comfort or comfort themselves by thumb sucking or cuddling a favorite object in response to their feelings of distress.

It appears that children must first be able to identify themselves as separate individuals before they can truly feel empathy for others. This happens sometime around the middle of the child's second year (Eisenberg, 1995).

Empathy, n. identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings or thoughts of another person.

Morality, n. conforming to the rules of right or wrong conduct. Webster's Dictionary of the English Language

How Empathy Develops

According to Hoffman's (1979) theory of the stages of empathy development, the personal distress reactions of the infant give way to the beginnings of true empathy in the two-year-old. The typical two-year-old can identify the person who is in distress and may offer assistance. However, the assistance may be inappropriate. The two-year-old is most likely to offer assistance based on her own needs rather than the needs of the person in distress. For example, she may offer her bottle or teddy bear as comfort to an older child or adult. The toddler may want to help, but may lack necessary knowledge, skills, or insights into appropriate helping behavior (Barnett et al., 1982).

It is not until the child is approximately six or seven years old that she becomes cognitively capable of "walking in someone else's shoes." Hoffman calls this the role of taking stage and theorizes that the ability to assume another person's perspective results in increasingly appropriate helping behavior.

It is only when the child approaches adolescence that he begins to think abstractly enough to empathize with groups of individuals such as the homeless or oppressed. Hoffman labels this stage comprehensive empathy and explains that it is at this point that we are first able to understand how the interplay of life's experiences may color attitudes, feelings, and behaviors.

While Hoffman's explanation of the developmental nature of empathy is strong, there are instances when children respond to others' distress with greater maturity than the theory might predict. Both biology and experience may account for those deviations.

Genetics, Experience, and Empathy

Many researchers believe that we are biologically programmed to be sensitive to the distress of others (Eisenberg, 1986, 1989; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). That is, the ability to empathize is beneficial to the species so the capability has become part of the biological inheritance. As human beings we are likely to develop empathy just as we are likely to develop language.

Experience may enhance or interfere with emerging abilities to empathize (Barnett, 1987; Hoffman, 1987). For example, when adults provide children with words to describe emotional states and describe their own feelings of empathy, children become increasingly aware of their own and others' emotional states (Eisenberg

et al., 1992, 1993; Fabes et al., 1990). In school-age children inductive reasoning (e.g., pointing out how others feel as a result of the child's behavior) promotes development of empathy. However, physical punishment, threats, and scolding may interfere with the child's developing ability to empathize (Eisenberg, 1995). When children have a warm, loving relationship with their caregivers, they feel secure and that security frees them to think about others rather than focusing entirely on themselves (Kestenbaum et al., 1989).

On the other hand, children who experience generally negative interpersonal relationships are particularly at risk for developing antisocial behavior. "Experiences that lead to fear and dislike of people...make the enjoyment of their suffering more likely" (Staub, 1995, p. 436).

How to Teach Empathy

Early childhood educators can promote the child's development of empathy by using a variety of strategies during normal daily activities.

Model Caring Behaviors. One of the best ways to promote empathy is to model empathetic caring. Talk about your feelings for others and how you share their joys, sorrows, pain, or delights. Tell children when you are excited for them or when you feel sorry that they are unhappy.

Name Emotions. Help children give names to their emotions. Most preschoolers can use the terms happy and sad, but are at a loss to describe their emotions precisely. Introduce feeling words such as lonely, frustrated, frightened, joyful, shocked, proud, discouraged, hopeful, unwanted, contented, anxious, or delighted as you read about story characters or simply live through daily events.

Interpret Emotions. As a circle time activity, invite children to "read" or interpret the emotions in the faces of people in large photographs or magazine pictures. Then ask, "Why do you think the girl feels surprised?" and "What could have happened to make the man look so discouraged?"

Role Play Helpful Behaviors. Dramatize stories about specific helpful acts. By discussing and playing out how to help, children learn skills and gain insights into appropriate helping. At the same time, they learn to take different perspectives.

Be Supportive. Maintain a warm, supportive relationship with children and set realistically high standards consistent with the developmental levels of the children. Teach Conflict Resolution. When a child does something wrong to another child, first demonstrate and verbalize empathetic care for the victim. Then point out to the perpetrator how her acts are related to the victim's feelings. By making the child aware of the consequences of her actions you help the preschooler become aware of the inner feelings of others. When the child understands the reasons for rules, she tends to view the world as a more positive, consistent, and meaningful place (Staub, 1995). Finally, reason with the child and help her think of appropriate alternative behaviors that might be used next time.

Conclusion

In the 1980s George Bush called upon Americans to become a kinder, gentler nation. In the world of the 1990s that challenge still echoes loudly in our ears. As we move into the next century, early childhood educators, in particular, can help our nation meet the challenge of becoming kinder and gentler in our dealings with others. By promoting the development of empathy in today's preschoolers, we can make a lasting contribution to a kinder, gentler world for tomorrow.

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