

After the Buzz, social thinking ideas for parents and caregivers

From *What's the Buzz?* for Early Learners: A complete social skills foundation course



Lesson 14 of 16: Empathy

After the Buzz presents ideas for parents, guardians and educators to encourage the generalisation of the social thinking the children have learnt in the session. Children rely on our commitment to consolidate these skills by modelling them, and emphasising the language and the ideas used in the lesson. Here are a few practical approaches to teach children what to *'say and do'* to display empathy towards others. Children can grow this essential social skill, but it takes practice, persistence, and guidance from the adults at home and at school.



You are your child's best emotional coach

The most natural way to teach empathy is for us to show empathy to our children at every opportunity that presents itself. Our children never stop watching and learning from us!

Seize the moment

Always use the real life to point out how empathy works. Highlight the experiences and perspectives of others when they happen. For example, if you are at the supermarket and you see a parent with a child who is having a tantrum, once out of ear shot, ask your child if they can work out how the parent and the child might be feeling. While watching television share your thoughts with your child about how the characters might be feeling. Discuss differences between your perspective and theirs.

Persist, persist and persist

Teaching the skills central to empathy does take time, and some kids require coaching for longer. As children get older and more verbal it's easy to think they should be more capable of displaying empathetic responses, but it's not always the case. Why not reuse the role-plays from the lesson together at home so they can see and feel how empathy is done? And, remember, when the time comes for them to use their empathic skills, they will need a little clever coaching! If they make an error try to build from the positives you've seen.

Help kids identify emotions

One of the first steps in teaching children empathy is to help children learn about their own emotions. Young children feel all of the emotions that we feel, but lack experience at identifying, labelling and managing those easy to runaway feelings. When parents help children name what they feel, children can make sense of their emotional world more easily. To help them understand an emotion they may be feeling, you might say to your son, "I can see you feel sad because Dakota took your toy. What do you think we should do about it?" Use language such as, "I know how you feel." Actually, by beginning with this simple statement, many a meltdown has been avoided.

The most helpful approach is to acknowledge how your child is feeling by recognising their upset, embarrassment or disappointment. Over time, as you continue to coach your child he or she will better understand how the actions of others affect them, and how their actions impact on others.

Teach children how to say “sorry”

Some youngsters find “sorry” difficult to say, and see it as an admission of failure or guilt. Used genuinely, “sorry” can repair so many situations. Explore what “sorry” is about, when to use it and how it can be said honestly. Have fun with your children role-playing situations where “sorry” might be helpful. Try “sorry” with a smile, a touch, a wink, a handshake, a rub on someone’s arm or a hug. Coach your child to understand that saying “sorry” may not always be accepted by another. However, it is a powerful signal to allow relationships to heal and grow.

Develop empathy through contribution

When we provide opportunities for our children to contribute they gain a sense they can make a difference, and that the world can be a better place because they are in it. Our challenge as parents is to find ways for them to develop compassion, empathy and, over time, a social conscience.

At home, one way to raise your children’s contribution is to organise for them to prepare a meal for the family each week or fortnight. Sure, it may end up making a little extra work for you, but it’s a long-term investment in their mental health. With help, most five year olds are capable of arranging a simple meal for the family and serving it to them. As we nudge children to do more for others it stretches their thoughtfulness about others.

Outside of home, continue to broaden your child’s world by arranging ‘acts of kindness’ they can give to others. One option is to involve the family in different forms of help, community or charity work – walks to raise money for hunger, for children with disability or disease, for animal shelters, for the homeless or helping out at the local aged care home. The notion of giving to others immerses them in an emotionally larger world where they can start to compare their life and their feelings to the lives of others who are less fortunate. As they see and participate, a more selfless view of life is naturally promoted, and no preaching is required. Ask yourself, how long is it since your child sent a thank-you card, a small present, a warm email, a friendly note, a hand-made card or made a phone call to someone who has been helpful or needs their spirits raised? Start by setting them up to deliver kindnesses. Teaching how to care to children underpins that they themselves are cared for.

Books and videos that teach empathy

Immersing children in a great story is another way to awaken empathy. The following books will help as they celebrate friendship, difference and the importance of caring for one another.

Bully by **Laura Vaccaro Seeger** (2013) London: Macmillan. YouTube -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz7X3WGMGRk>

The Invisible Boy by **Trudy Ludwig** (2013) New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ramona the Pest by **Beverly Cleary** (2003) London: Harper Collins. YouTube -

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_hgy4yJVq0

One Day and One Amazing Morning on Orange Street by **Joanne Rocklin** (2011) Amulet Books.

Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning About Empathy by Bob Sornson (2013) Ferne Press.

Empathy: Promoting Resilience and Emotional Intelligence for Students Aged 7 to 11 Years by **Bob Bellhouse, Andrew Fuller, Glenda Johnston** (2005) **Heart Masters**.

Photocopiable and Online Resources

These resources can also be downloaded from www.whatsthebuzz.net.au