

Teaching Empathy

by Denise Cavner

A child cries out the teacher's name, a pile of blocks rest at his feet. Another child nearby chants, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

This is a familiar scene in a preschool classroom. One child apologizes to another about a wrong he committed as the skills of interactions and relationships are built. The work of early childhood educators has often

been described as the work of building relationships: among children, between children and staff, and between staff and families. As teachers we have many opportunities to teach children about the role that their emotions play in helping them get along with others and having their needs met. Teachers have the challenge

and the opportunity to positively affect children's social-emotional development. When working with children and teaching these skills, it is important to understand that there is no separation of emotions from learning. During the early childhood years, children are capable of learning how to:

- use appropriate language in interactions with others
- make good choices
- demonstrate empathic behavior.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand another's perspective and to consider it before acting. This is a difficult skill for a young child who is egocentric — in the "Me!" stage. The ability to feel empathy is directly related to the ability to form relationships. Relationships give children the feeling of security, which allows them to feel safe and move beyond their own needs. Children learn to care about others when they experience the feeling of being cared for themselves.

There are many benefits to teaching empathic behavior and strengthening children's moral development:

Positive interactions among children: As children gain the ability to understand their own emotions and feelings, they can better understand the feelings of another. Attainment of these skills will create a more cohesive classroom environment with less challenging behaviors.

Strong interpersonal skills that help children to be successful later in life: As children gain the ability to put themselves in another's shoes, they will have the ability to get along well with others. This skill will later affect a person's ability to get a job, build relationships, and communicate their needs appropriately.

Getting along with others builds self-esteem: Positive self-esteem strengthens a child's ability to feel good about the choices that they make. Children will build strength and confidence in who they want to be and have the ability to allow others to be who they want to be.

Beginning to understand social responsibilities: As children gain the skills of empathic behavior, they will recognize how their actions affect other people and events. This presents an opportunity to teach children how to care for

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topics such as Brain Development, Classroom Behavior Management, and Mental Health Activities in the Preschool Classroom. As she was gaining her Early Childhood Education, she found that her classes in Psychology were very helpful in understanding the needs of children in her class and in working with children who had challenging behaviors. She continued her education in Psychology and currently holds a Masters of Arts. She also has a certificate as an Infant Mental Health Specialist.

others, plants and animals, and the environment.

Strategies for teaching empathy

There are many activities that can be offered to support the development of empathy in the classroom:

- Have live plants and/or a garden for the children to care for. Children can work together to create and care for living plants. Children will learn quickly how their care is required to keep the plants alive.
- By having a pet in the classroom for the children to care for, the children will learn the responsibility of providing food and water for the pet's survival. They will also be able to build a bond or relationship as they care for the pet. If the children are too young or unable to care for a living creature or there is a fear that the animal may be harmed, a stuffed animal can be introduced as a new member of the class. A stuffed bear needs love and caring, too. The children can name the class mascot and care for him during class and on weekends. A journal can be kept of the pet's weekend adventures. Children will begin to think about another's feelings as they imagine what their pet was thinking and feeling.
- Talk with the children in the classroom about those who are absent. Where are they? Why are they not at school? Are they sick? Are they visiting a friend? Will they be missed at school? What fun activities will they be missing while they are absent?
- Provide ample opportunities for children to discuss their emotions. Supply children with the vocabulary to use in explaining their feelings. Discuss all feelings equally. Remember there are no wrong feelings. But there are appropriate ways to express feelings.
- Read books that lead to discussions about emotions. Include books that lead to discussions about some of the more uncommon feelings (for example, jealousy or envy) or those that may be difficult to discuss (for example, embarrassment or shame).
- Provide role modeling opportunities. It is important to teach appropriate behaviors when children are not angry. When a child is overwhelmed by their emotions, it is difficult for them to apply reason or to think beyond themselves. Discussing scenarios during small group activity time gives children the opportunity to practice skills and use their reasoning abilities.
- Discuss facial expressions. Young children are just beginning to learn how to interpret facial expressions. It is difficult for a child to recognize how their actions are affecting their playmates, and because children do not have the expressive language that an adult has, it is not until the other child hits them or cries out that they realize that they were bothering her.
- The mind and body are connected and when children feel emotion it affects their body sensations (for example, anger and embarrassment feel 'hot' and happiness feels 'bubbly'). Talking to children about these sensations will help them understand and recognize how their bodies are affected by emotion and to gain better control.

Skill building

Children must be taught how to express empathy. It is not a skill that they are born with. Just like sharing and playing

with others, children must be guided in what to do. When a child hurts another child's body or feelings, it is important not to shame the child or use intimidation to get the child to apologize. The child may internalize these attacks, which could be detrimental to their self-esteem. The goal is to provide the child with the necessary skills to correct the situation. Try these strategies:

- Assist the child who has caused the conflict or pain, in talking to the other child about their feelings over what just happened. This can be done by role modeling, offering the words, or standing nearby as support.
- Assist the children in problem solving together and offer suggestions in how they can correct the situation. With the familiar scenario mentioned in the opening statement, one solution could be to rebuild the block structure together. The child who knocked down the structure can now feel the pride in his accomplishment of creating a building and gain a better understanding of how it would feel to have something he built knocked down.

Apologies

Teachers and parents alike often require that a child apologize to another child for their actions, such as the child who knocked down the blocks of another child. While apologies are one way to express your feelings about a wrongdoing, young children's moral development limits their understanding of this action. When we force children to apologize, a child may learn that they may only need to apologize to correct a situation and not learn how their action affected another and not learn to be responsible for their behavior. In addition, children are being instructed to express feelings that may not be feeling. What about the child who is not sorry? Do we want him to learn to

mimic the apology just to get the adult to leave him alone? Role modeling can be a strong tool. You can teach empathy by interacting with children and modeling appropriate language and behaviors. It is good practice to ask both children what they are feeling. Give each child an opportunity to discuss how the event affected them. Validate their feelings. It is important not to make a child feel guilty about what they are feeling or to tell them that what they are feeling is wrong. This will only confuse a child or make them feel shameful. Soon the child may act out or hide their feelings from you and even from herself.

Respect

As adults, we often want to tell children how they are feeling or we may deny their feelings altogether:

“There is nothing to be afraid of.”

“That’s silly, you shouldn’t care what others think of you.”

If we want to teach children how to understand and to respect another child’s feelings, we need to respect them enough to understand their feelings. It is also important to recognize that individuals may have different feelings. The classroom climate must be built on respect. Children need to experience that they are important, valued individuals. They must also observe adults showing respect towards others. There should be a sense of community as children work in collaboration on activities.

Challenges

Some of the children in our programs may be faced with additional barriers to learning empathetic behaviors and may have difficulties thinking beyond their own needs. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect or who have not been given an opportunity to build positive adult /child relationships, may not have developed a feeling of security, which allows them to think of others. This emotional distancing in children can prove to be challenging in the classroom, as it may appear that they can cause pain without remorse. These children are capable of learning empathy and are well worth the extra effort. The consequences of not making the effort could be detrimental beyond the individual child’s development, as you probably have found that a lack of empathic behavior affects many.

Additional Techniques

Creating a safe haven within the classroom, which offers unconditional love and respect, is important for children whose home lives may be chaotic or lack nurturing. These children may continue to test you and the other children as they learn new expectations and that they are loved for who they are. Some techniques to create a safe environment:

- *Consistency in classroom routine:* Children with emotional distress need to know that they are safe. They will continue to test you and the classroom rules to ensure that they can trust you and the rules to remain the same.

- *Classroom rules:* Rules are best understood and enforced when they are developed together. When you don’t understand the rule or its rationale, it can be difficult to remember and follow.

- *Appropriate expectations:* Taking the time to learn about each child’s abilities will help you to create an environment and activities that will keep him engaged in learning.

Summary

The role of an early childhood educator can be challenging. As more and more research shows that a child’s early years are a vital part of growth in learning both academics and moral development, we recognize more than ever the important position that the teacher plays in this acquisition of life skills, including empathy.

Resources

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