

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Empathy



What You Need to Know

Showing empathy means imagining how someone else is feeling and responding with care or kindness. Signs of empathy begin to emerge as early as infancy. For example, some infants will cry upon hearing another infant cry, mimic others' facial expressions (e.g., smiling, or frowning), and/or use their social smile to engage others. While the ability and skills needed to understand, perspective-take, and respond appropriately to others' emotions do not emerge until toddlerhood, these early mimicking behaviors illustrate infants' growing awareness of others' emotional states and are important in their developing ability to consider and care for the needs of others.

During infancy, teachers can play an important role in fostering empathy by establishing a secure, warm relationship with infants. When infants feel understood, accepted, and cared for by caregivers, they will be more likely to eventually do the same for others. Just like other developmental skills, empathy is developed through exposure and practice. Infants are keen observers – if adults are considerate and caring for the needs of others, infants will notice and remember these behaviors in the future.

Things to Consider

At about 6 months of age, infants begin to pick up on and draw from the reactions of caregivers to guide their own feelings toward a person or situation. When an unfamiliar person enters the classroom, for example, some infants may look to their teacher as a way of gauging whether or not this new individual is “safe.” When their teacher expresses enthusiasm and excitement (e.g., smiling, or upbeat attitude), infants are more likely to feel reassured and comfortable with this person. On the other hand, if a teacher expresses anxiety or discomfort (even a little bit), infants can detect this and are likely to experience similar negative feelings. This process, called “social referencing,” helps infants assess and understand the world around them and is an important building block for empathy.

Development of Empathy

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Attend with interest when others show they are sad or fearful by their facial expressions, voices, or actions.	Respond to others' emotional expressions, often by sharing an emotional reaction.
Cry when another child cries.	Look sad or concerned when another child is crying or upset.
	Seek adults' help or offer something, such as a blanket, food, or toy, to another child when they are upset.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of empathy:

- ◆ Read books about feelings. Talk about and mimic what characters are feeling. Book suggestions: *Bear Feels Sick* by Karma Wilson and Jane Chapman, *Baby Happy Baby Sad* by Leslie Patricelli, and *My Friend is Sad* by Mo Williams.
- ◆ Use puppets to model feelings.
- ◆ For older infants, engage in dramatic play – include dolls or roles that prompt infants to care for others (e.g., taking care of a crying baby).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Empathy

	OBSERVE
Monday	Carefully observe infants and their displays of “empathy.” Notice if and when they naturally pay attention to other infants’ emotions (e.g., crying, or laughing) and if they imitate others’ emotional states. For older infants, notice acts of kindness or comfort toward peers or during pretend play (e.g., giving a hug or rocking a baby doll). All of these are foundational building blocks for empathy.
Narrate and Label Empathy (Your Own)	
Tuesday	Focus infants’ attention on empathy by explicitly narrating your own acts of empathy. Squat down and offer to pick up the infant while saying, “I think you are feeling sad that Mommy left. I miss my mom sometimes too. Can I give you a zzzzzhug?” “I see (Child) is crying, let’s find their teddy to make them feel bzzzzetter.”
Narrate and Label Empathy (Children’s)	
Wednesday	Draw attention to and encourage infants’ own use of empathy. Get on the child’s level and use warm expressions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">“I see you are looking over at (Child). They look upset, don’t they? Let’s see if we can make them feel better by finding their pacifier.” Then, have the infant hand the pacifier to their peer. Acknowledge with enthusiasm (e.g., smile, give a hug, clap, or high-five) when an infant gives you something during play (e.g., “Wow, you gave me the block! Thank you so much for sharing with me.”) or offers to help (e.g., “Thank you for handing me the diaper! You are a great helper!”).
Thursday	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.