

CORE SKILL: RELATE

Empathy



What You Need to Know

Showing empathy means imagining how someone else is feeling and responding with care or kindness. Toddlers are just beginning to understand that others may have thoughts or feelings that are different from their own, which is key for developing empathy. Young children need to have a basic understanding of common feelings, be able to put themselves in another person’s shoes (consider their perspective), *and* develop a comforting response. Just like other developmental skills, empathy is developed through exposure and practice. Toddlers are keen observers — if adults are considering and caring for the need of others, toddlers will watch and model these behaviors.

Things to Consider

Often, we insist children say, “I’m sorry,” if they hurt or upset a peer. But only saying “I’m sorry,” doesn’t help children develop empathy. It’s most effective to help children see the link between their actions (e.g., pushing or hitting) and the other child’s feelings (e.g., hurt or sad), and consider what could make the other child feel better. For example, say, “Oh (Child), you are feeling very sad. Look (Child), (Child) is crying and sad because you hit them. Let’s see how we can help them feel better.”

Development of Empathy

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Respond to others’ emotional expressions.	Recognize feelings and emotions of others.
Share emotional reactions (e.g., smiling or showing excitement when others do).	Respond to feelings and emotions of others (with adult support).
Look sad or concerned when another child is crying or upset.	Describe feelings of characters in a book (with adult support).
Seek adult help to offer comfort to an upset child (e.g., offer a blanket, food, or soft toy).	Show care and concern for others, including providing comfort to those in distress.
	Respond to the needs of others.
	Try to help others with a task.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of empathy:

- ◆ Read books about feelings. Talk about what characters are feeling (and why) and what could make them feel better.
Book suggestions:
 - *Bear Feels Sick* by Karma Wilson
 - *My Friend is Sad* by Mo Williams
 - *Baby Happy Baby Sad* by Leslie Patricelli
- ◆ Use puppets to model feelings and empathy.
- ◆ Build opportunities for caring into your classroom routine with pets, visitors, and/or partnerships where children do something nice for other classrooms or the community (e.g., connecting with a retirement home where children send cards and visit).
- ◆ Set up opportunities for children to help each other and take care of classroom responsibilities (e.g., set up a challenging task that a child will require help with, and encourage others to join in and assist).
- ◆ Engage in dramatic play: include dolls or roles that prompt children to care for others (e.g., taking care of a crying baby).
- ◆ Imagining how someone else is feeling may be especially challenging for some children. To make the feelings of others more concrete during play or book readings, consider providing a Feelings Chart. Some children may benefit from having a visual cue to help identify feelings and emotions.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Empathy

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe children and their empathy. Notice acts of kindness or comfort, as well as simple acts such as a child paying attention to another child or crying when they hear others cry. All of these acts form the foundation for empathy.
Tuesday FOCUS	Narrate and Label Empathy Focus children's attention on empathy by explicitly narrating your <i>own</i> acts of empathy. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I think you are feeling sad that your mom left. I miss my mom sometimes too. Can I sit with you for a little while?"◆ "I see (Child) is crying. I'm going to give them a hug and see if I can help..."
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Prompt Children to Consider the Needs/Feelings of Others Prompt children to consider how others' feelings are related to their own behaviors: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "How do you think they feel when you push them?"◆ "I think they're really happy that you shared that toy with them!" Or others' feelings that they observe: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I think they're crying because they miss their mom. What do you think?" <p>It may be challenging for some children to take the perspectives of others. To help bridge the connection, relate the event to a concrete experience. For example, "(Child) is crying because they bumped their knee. You bumped your knee yesterday (<i>pointing to child's knee</i>). That hurt! It felt better when we put ice on it. What might help (Child) feel better?"</p>
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Prompt Children to Provide Care for Others Prompt children to show acts of kindness: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "What do you think could help them feel better? Would a hug make them feel happier?"◆ "Do you think our fish is feeling hungry? What should we do (<i>offering two visual choices</i>)?"
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.