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# Working with Families to Support Children's Empathy

## INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the article “The Importance of Showing Empathy to Kids Who Learn and Think Differently.” The article is made available by Understood, a non-profit supporting families and children. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

## Goals

- ◆ Think about classroom scenarios and learn to tell the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- ◆ Learn how to work with families together to nurture their children’s empathy.
- ◆ Recognize how your own empathetic responses support your work with families and children.

## Activity

- ◆ Read the article.
- ◆ Use the reflection questions to explore what empathy means. Create a plan on how to work with families to foster their children’s empathy.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support children’s empathy.

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**Empathy isn’t about feeling sorry, but it is about feelings.**

**Amanda Morin**

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the difference between empathy and sympathy? Read the scenarios below. Think about whether the described response is empathetic or sympathetic.
  - Ms. Santos was dropping Pilar off at preschool and appeared somewhat distressed. The teacher noticed Ms. Santos and approached gently, “Is everything ok? I can see you seem somewhat upset. Would you like to talk about it?”
  - Ahmed was picking up his little sister Samira from daycare visibly limping compared to the day before. Noticing his difficult movement, the teacher says, “You look like you’re getting around ok. I’m sorry you got hurt, feel better.”
  - Thao was commenting to the teacher how frustrated he was with the school’s lunch options. The teacher listened until he was done and replied, “Thank you for sharing that with me. It is very important for us to make sure families feel that the food we serve is respectful of cultural and religious practices. When would be a good time for us to talk more about this and include the center director?”
- ◆ What helped you to decide whether a response was empathetic or sympathetic? Why do you think understanding the difference matters? How may it affect your interactions and support for children?
- ◆ The article outlines four main elements of empathy:
  - Perspective taking
  - Setting aside judgment
  - Understanding the child’s feelings
  - Communicating your understanding
- ◆ Think about a past interaction (or a possible future conversation) with a family that was difficult.
  - Write it down and share with the person next to you.
  - Use the four elements to outline what an empathetic response from you would look like.
    - How would you approach each step?
    - Which step might be easier? Which might be harder? Why?
    - How would you change your response if there was a language barrier with the family?
- ◆ Plan for connecting with families around supporting their child’s development of empathy. For example, consider:
  - **Sharing this article.** How can you engage families in sharing their empathetic responses to their children’s strong emotions? What works for them? What doesn’t?
  - **Sharing activities.** For example, talk with children about their own and others’ feelings. Consider learning, discussing, and using feeling words from different languages.
  - **Holding an empathy meeting.** Talk to families in your classroom about how they show empathy or kindness to others. Listen to their ideas for how you can connect that to the classroom.
  - **School-home connection.** Share with families the ways you support empathy at school. This can be through photographs, children’s drawings, your care notes, etc.
  - **Celebrating children’s understanding of empathy.** Look for opportunities to encourage positive behavior showing caring and kindness to others.
  - **Sharing books.** Allow children to take home books about empathy. Or make a list of books families can look for at the library. Include some questions families can use as conversation starters with their children.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about working with families to support children's empathy:

- ◆ **Source:** Sesame Street in Communities
- ◆ **Video:** Empathy
- ◆ **Link:** <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/activities/empathy/>
- ◆ **Description:** This video shows the puppet Murray having some trouble understanding what empathy means. Teachers and families can use this resource to help children get clarity on this emotion.
  
- ◆ **Source:** Edutopia
- ◆ **Blog:** Building Empathetic Relationships with the Parents of Your Most Challenging Student
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/building-empathetic-relationships-parents-your-most-challenging-student>
- ◆ **Description:** This blog looks at how teachers can engage empathetically with families. Teachers can model empathy by understanding a family's background and experiences. This will strengthen their relationship with the families and will help children learn from example what it means to show empathy.
  
- ◆ **Source:** Medium
- ◆ **Article:** Learning the Languages of Our Students — An Exercise in Empathy
- ◆ **Link:** <https://medium.com/@lingodeer/learning-the-languages-of-our-students-an-exercise-in-empathy-ee83e8866fb2>
- ◆ **Description:** This article talks about the importance for teachers to understand the task of learning a new language. This challenging experience is one faced by many families in early childhood classrooms. Through this exercise, teachers may learn to be more empathetic to dual language learner students and their families.