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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Raising Considerate Children

Little is more important to parents than raising considerate children — children who feel a moral obligation to treat others with kindness and respect. Parental examples and instruction are key, but children must also have an empathic ability to understand others. In this article, we'll explore ways that parents can help children develop this important skill.

What is Empathy?: Empathy is the ability to understand another's needs and wants. Empathy includes an understanding that others often react like we do. However, empathy also includes the deeper understanding that others can differ from us in their point of view, interpretation of events and feelings. Children can begin to grasp this deeper understanding as young as age 3.

Helping Children Develop Empathy: Parents can help their children develop empathy by explaining about another's thoughts and feelings. "Jimmy gets upset when you take his toy just like you do when someone takes your toy." Even more valuable than explanation will be a parent's ability to empathize with their children. A Lucy Daniels Center golden rule of child development is that children learn to treat others as they have felt treated by their loved ones.

Effective modeling of empathy requires that parents understand and respect their child's perspectives and actions. Corrections should be tactful without implications that a child was stupid or silly. The following illustrates effective modeling:

Four-year old Jeremiah was surprised to see his preschool teacher in a local park. He ran to his Dad, saying, "Why is Mrs. Stevens here? She lives at school." Although amused, Jeremiah's father realized that Jeremiah was disturbed and confused. Jeremiah's father replied, "Until now, you have only seen Mrs. Stevens at school, so you thought she always stays at school. But Mrs. Stevens only comes to school for part of the day, just like you. She lives in a home with her family, just like us."

Jeremiah's father helped enlarge his son's understanding of the world without undermining his reasoning. He empathically recognized Jeremiah's anxiety about meeting Mrs. Stevens outside of school and provided specific reassurance and support.

Avoid Trivialization and Assumptions: We recommend that parents avoid discounting or trivializing their children's experience so children don't needlessly feel, stupid or silly, or worry that they have the wrong feelings. The following example illustrates an approach that respects and does not discount children's feelings:

Three-year old Dennis was transitioning out of taking naps. However, he wasn't sleeping enough to make it through the day. Little frustrations became big upsets during the long hours between dinner and bedtime. One evening, Dennis wailed because his beloved stuffed bear was not in its usual place. Dennis cried even more after his mother said, "It's OK, you are just tired." His mother changed tactics. He began to settle as she hugged him, saying, "I will put bear in the right place tonight. I am sorry you are so sad." After Dennis calmed down, she added, "I know that you love bear and want him to be where he belongs. When you are tired, it is hard to manage sad feelings. That is why you became so, so upset."

Adults discount the feelings of children whenever they say that children are just seeking attention or just tired. Dennis' mother realized that "just tired" did not acknowledge how much Dennis cared about his bear, tired or not. At first, Dennis became more upset because his mother did not empathize with him and he was left alone with his worry. Her ability to change approach and empathize enabled a discussion in which tiredness was helpfully discussed as one factor rather than the entire explanation. Dennis was helped to have a fuller understanding of how feelings work, and he was in a better position to understand the feelings of others.

Sometimes it is easy for parents to figure out their children's feelings on the basis of their actions or appearance. However, children do not always show their feelings. Parents will more effectively model empathy when they are cautious about making assumptions. The following vignette illustrates that children's feelings may not be obvious from their behavior:

Naomi, a 2 1/2-year-old, clung to her mother when being left for the first time at her new child care center." After her mother left, Naomi was quiet for a while, then enticed by her teachers to play dress-up. With continued teacher effort and support, she stayed busy through the day. Meanwhile, Naomi's mother immersed herself in tasks at work, confiding in a friend, "I'm enjoying this project we are working on, but I'm also worried about how Naomi is doing." Her friend understood that Naomi's mother could be upset and not show it. When Naomi and her mother reunited, teacher and mother assumed that Naomi's busy involvement in activities showed that she was not missing her mommy.

Naomi's mother and teacher made the common error of assuming that a child's behavior always mirrors their feelings. Actually, Naomi, like her mother, found ways to involve herself in activities, partly as a way to not think about how much she was missing her mother. Therefore, the most helpful response to Naomi would have recognized that she managed and found some activities that interested her even though she missed her mommy. Acknowledging mixed feelings and the presence of an inner life helps children to feel understood, safe, and in the best position to understand and dignify the inner life of others.

Empathy is imperfect. No one person can possibly fully understand another. Everyone stumbles in the effort. A parent's humility about the limits of what he or she can know, their openness to learning from their children, and their granting their children a full and independent emotional life will enable their children to do the same for others and to thereby build deep, intimate, and sustaining relationships.