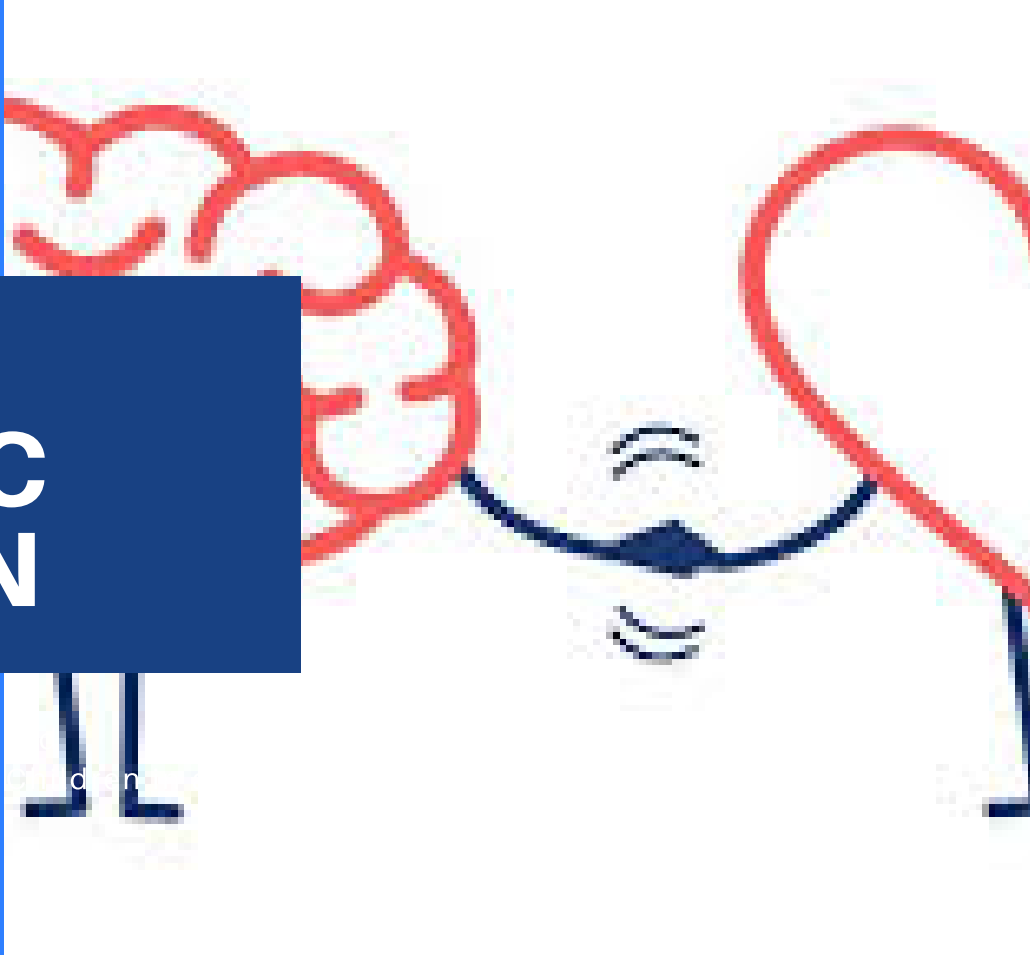


RAISING EMPATHIC CHILDREN

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Consider a world where people stop and think about the feelings of others (their potential misfortunes even) before they act on their own emotional impulses. Might we see a decrease in bullying and anger related outbursts and an increase in helping those in need? Isn't it worth a try? One thing I know for certain is that we can't afford to continue to raise empathy-deficient children in this world.

FOSTER EMPATHY WITH THESE FOUR STRATEGIES:

1. Validate a range of emotions. If kids are to care about the feelings of others, they need to achieve self-awareness of their own feelings. Too often parents run in to fix things so that kids don't have to experience negative emotions, but this is a mistake. Negative emotions are part of life at every age and stage. Kids need to learn how to process and cope with all of their emotions, not just the good ones. It's never too late to build an emotional vocabulary. I can't tell you how many adolescents flop down on my couch and struggle to process any emotions beyond mad, sad and happy. Life is full of ups and downs and one million shades of gray - discover and discuss every emotion that people encounter as often as possible. By validating a range of emotions, you help your child view others through a new lens.

2. Talk; don't shield. The world can be a scary place and it's no big secret that the landscape of fear has changed for parents over time. School shootings, food allergies and cyberbullying are just a few things that worry parents these days. As a result, we tend to shield kids from sad stories as much as possible to preserve their innocence. The truth is that talking to kids about global issues and tragic stories actually opens the door to empathic thinking. When we hide the truth, we send the message that these things don't matter. When we engage in meaningful (and age-appropriate) conversation, we plant the seeds of empathy.

3. Demonstrate empathy. Sounds easy, right? The problem is that in this culture of busy, it's difficult to slow down and focus on things like kindness and empathy. When we are always on the go, and probably sleep-deprived to some degree, we are short on time and patience. The key to raising empathic kids is to show empathy in your parenting and out in the world. Stay calm when you encounter a frustrating parenting moment. Take the time to process your emotions and triggers before you react to model emotional regulation to your kids. Consider their triggers before you respond in anger. Demonstrating empathy in our day-to-day lives helps kids develop an internal sense of right and wrong.

4. Take action. As difficult as it can feel to take on one more thing, volunteering to help others is a great way to instill empathy in your children. Think small. Help carry groceries or rake leaves for an elderly neighbor, for example. Building community connections and providing first person help encourages kids to become change-makers. Last week an envelope containing two dollars with the words "pay it forward" came home in Riley's homework packet. The goal was to give the money to someone in need and then write about how it felt to help someone. She chose to pay it forward to a homeless man who often greets us near our grocery store. With a huge smile, she walked right up to him, chatted for a few moments and then returned to me. "Let's do that again", she whispered, as she buckled her booster seat. The man approached me as I returned the grocery cart. "Your daughter put a smile on my face today," he said, "You have one kind little girl."

