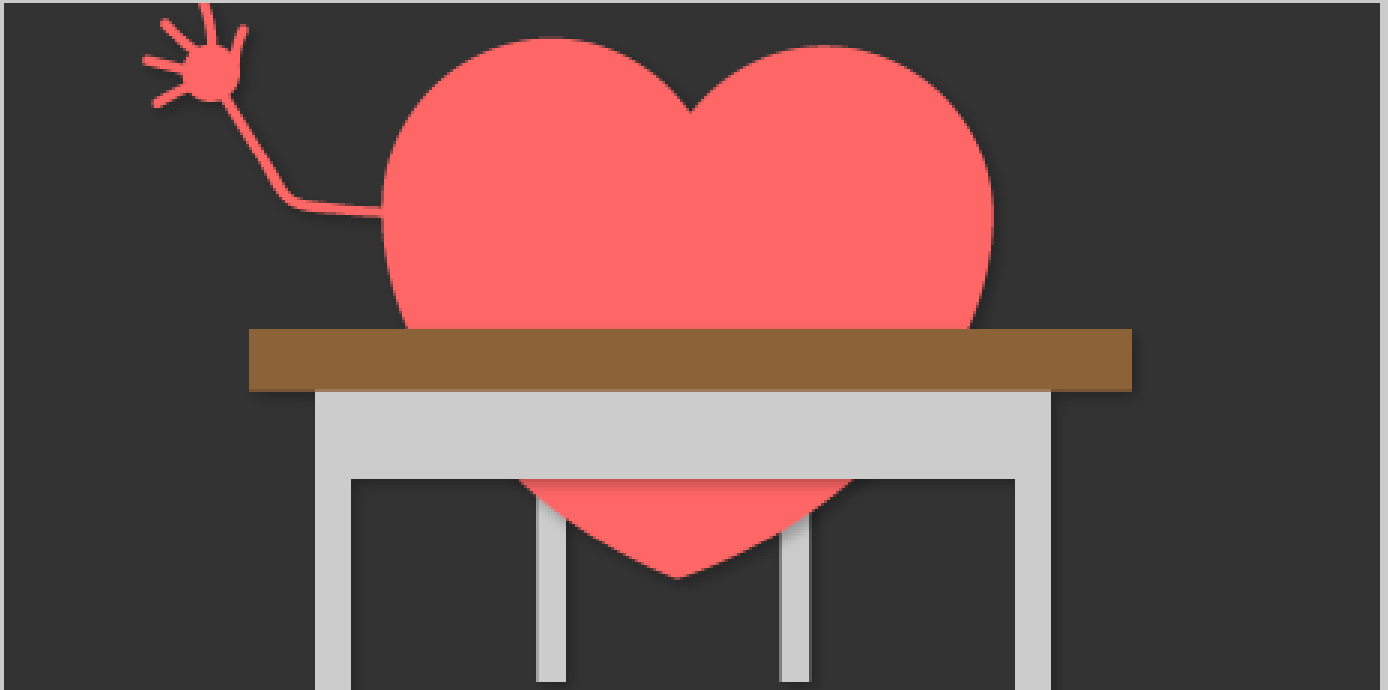


*Student Support Department*

# BENEFITS OF TEACHING EMPATHY TO CHILDREN

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## **Provide children with the support they need to develop strong self-regulation skills**

Feeling someone else's pain is unpleasant, so it shouldn't surprise us if a child's first impulse is to shrink away. Children are more likely to overcome this impulse when they feel secure, and have strong self-regulation skills. For instance, when children have secure attachment relationships with their caregivers, they know they can count on their caregivers for emotional and physical support. And these children are more likely to sympathize and offer help to people in distress. In addition, children who are better at regulating their negative emotions tend to show greater empathic concern for others

Thus, we can foster empathy by being "emotion coaches." That means acknowledging (rather than dismissing) our children's negative feelings, and engaging them in conversation about the causes and effects of emotions. It also means helping children find constructive ways to handle their bad moods.

## **Seize everyday opportunities to model—and induce—sympathetic feelings for other people**

If you observe someone in distress (in real life, on TV, or in a book), talk with your child about how that person must feel (Pizarro and Salovey 2002). Even a very brief conversation might have an effect.

## **Help children discover what they have in common with other people**

Adults tend to feel greater empathy for an individual when they perceive the individual to be similar to them. They also find it easier to empathize with someone who is familiar. Research suggests that children have similar biases. As a result, one of the best ways to encourage empathy is to make children conscious of what they have in common with others. Another is to get out and meet people from different backgrounds, and learn about what life is like in far away places. Conversations are helpful, but it's worth remembering that children are heavily influenced by what we actually do, and less by what we say.

Studies also suggest that schools boost empathy in students when they foster multiculturalism -- an inclusive, warm attitude about cultural diversity. Moreover, this enhanced empathy is linked with increased happiness and scholastic achievement.

## **Why "feeling someone else's pain" isn't the whole story**

Having affective empathy isn't enough. To be good helpers, we also need cognitive empathy -- the ability to take another person's perspective, and imagine what actions might make that person feel better. The process is more dispassionate and cerebral, and less stressful. It's also leads to more accurate judgments. Research suggests that role-playing is useful.

## **Help young children improve their face-reading skills**

It's hard to show empathy if you can't read faces well. Children who have more trouble identifying emotion in faces are more likely to have peer problems and learning difficulties. Studies suggest that children develop better "mind-reading" skills when we expose them to accurate, sensitive talk about thoughts and feelings. In particular, Children develop better emotion-reading skills when their parents help them find appropriate labels for the emotions the observe. Parents can also help by discussing the causes and consequences of specific emotions. Children are sensitive to much more than a person's facial expressions. They also notice tone of voice, body posture, and gestures. Whether you are reading a story together, or observing someone in real life, help children make connections between different child kinds of nonverbal cues.