



THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Compassion and concern for the well-being of others is learned behavior and often referred to as empathy. At a very young age, parents and caregivers can begin fostering empathy in their children to help them build resistance to violence and negative social behaviors.

WHAT IS EMPATHY?

- ☞ Empathy is the ability to relate to another person's feelings.
- ☞ Empathy means putting yourself in another person's place and feeling his or her feelings.
- ☞ Empathy is caring about the other person's feelings, even if you disagree with them.

WHY IS EMPATHY IMPORTANT?

- ☞ Being empathic to another person shows them that we really care.
- ☞ Children who are empathic are less likely to act aggressively or violently.
- ☞ Empathy builds healthy relationships.

HOW DOES EMPATHY DEVELOP IN CHILDREN?

- ☞ Around eight months, an infant begins to develop a sense that other people can and will share in his or her feelings.
- ☞ Around twelve months, a child feels distress when another child falls or cries.
- ☞ After age one, a child becomes more aware that he or she is distinct from others and tries to soothe another crying child.
- ☞ Around age two, children begin to realize that someone else's feelings differ from their own and become more sensitive to cues revealing what another child feels (i.e., facial expressions, body language, etc.).
- ☞ In late childhood, children can understand another person's feelings beyond the immediate situation. For example, they may notice that a friend gets really quiet when her mother yells at her.



HOW CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP EMPATHY?

- ☞ Help your child identify and appropriately express his/her own feelings. For example, you may say, "I know that you are angry, but it is not okay to hurt your friend. You must use your words when you are angry."
- ☞ Help children identify and understand the feelings of others. For instance, while reading to your child you might say, "The boy in the story has a very sad face. Why do you think he is sad?"
- ☞ Children learn empathy by seeing how adults react to their feelings. If they are empathized with when they are sad, mad or scared, they will learn through role modeling to respond to others in the same way.
- ☞ Children learn empathy when discipline calls attention to the distress their misbehavior caused. An example of this might be saying, "When you pushed your friend, she was hurt and felt sad."
- ☞ Listen to your child at least ten minutes each day without any distractions. Maintain eye contact with your child while he or she is talking.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, call our Helpline at 1-800-CHILDREN (244-5373). You may also send an email to: helpline@preventchildabusega.org. Understanding the importance of empathy is just one way communities can work to protect children and prevent child abuse. ***Preventing child abuse is the work of everyone, every day.*** Join our efforts.