

# Building Empathy

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A few months ago, my 3 year old son Joshua broke his favorite bat-man figurine (the dark knight to be exact!). He was terribly upset. I tried to comfort him by telling him it would be ok and that maybe we could try to fix it. My husband Danny interjected by reminding Josh that he has lots of other toys that he can play with. Danny and I made some big mistakes (at least in Joshua's world). While our intentions were good and our words patient, our approach to comforting our son was, well, lacking to say the least. Josh got more upset. Danny and I got more stressed. And soon the dark knight was flying across the room and Josh was left in tears. I realized, after the fact of course, that Danny and I had missed out on an essential moment for emotion coaching our son and more importantly, for letting our son know that we empathize with his feelings. So easy to say...yet so hard to do, especially when the dark knight hits you on the head (but that is another story in parenting).

How do we build empathy? How do we teach it to our children? How do we apply it while disagreeing with close others or colleagues? How do we remember to use this skill when we are mad or stressed? I decided I needed to know the answers. Not just for my son, but for all of my relationships, and of course, in my profession working with students. So I have begun my journey trying to learn all about empathy. I found some wonderful definitions of empathy that I would like to share with you.

- "Inner experience of sharing in and comprehending the momentary psychological state of another" (Schafer, 1959).
- "Walk in someone else's shoes" (Myrick & Erney, 1985).
- "Reaction to the observed experiences of another" (Davis, 1980).
- "Transforming personal assumptions about knowing": Reflective judgment model (Kitchner & King, 1990).

The latter is my personal favorite. It reminds us that empathy is both emotional and cognitive and that we need to be aware of the fact that we may not think, see or perceive the world the way other people do. We cannot assume that we know what other people know and vice-versa, that people know what we know. Our realities truly are our own creation.

It seems exhausting to try to then take time to learn about someone else's reality each time we interact with him or her. But I am learning that unless we do, we miss a vital moment of true connection. With my son, I understood he was upset, but I did not get that his *whole world*, at least in that moment, revolved around his toys. I guess his situation is comparable to my laptop crashing while typing an important report! When such an event has happened, I wanted the *whole world* to stop and help me. I see that Joshua wanted the same attention!

So how can we build empathy? It is interesting; empathy is not something we are born with necessarily, though as humans we are equipped to develop the skill. Children, usually after the age of 4 yrs. old, develop "theory of mind", an understanding of other's thinking, awareness and insight that other people are not necessarily thinking what they themselves are. This usually occurs simultaneously with decreased egocentrism (Piaget & Barbel, 1967). But from there, we must practice building empathy and seek out opportunities to do so. It

requires experiential learning and practice, a desire to connect deeply with another person, motivation and imagination to step into another's reality, as well as learning to listen intently and verbally acknowledging a person's experience. These skills often are part of compassionate communication. More specific examples (Coulehan, Platt & Enger, 2001) are:

- Recognizing presence of strong feelings (i.e., fear, anger, grief, disappointment); pausing to imagine how a person might be feeling in a given situation.
- Validating or legitimizing feelings (*"I imagine that you must be frustrated"*).
- Respecting a person's effort to cope with the predicament.
- Offering support and partnership (*"Let's see what we can do together to problem-solve this"*).

Other ways, according to Coulehan et al. (2001), to build empathy are to query and to ask people to tell you more about the situation (such as *"Can you tell me more about that?"*, *"What has this been like for you?"*, *"How has all of this made you feel?"*) and to clarify (such as *"Let me see if I've gotten this right ..."*, *"Tell me more about ..."*, *"I want to make sure I understand what you've said ..."*).

Not surprising, the benefits of learning empathy are numerous. The literature indicates that empathy is essential for enhancing interpersonal relationships, overall life satisfaction, increasing coping skills, decreasing depression, and providing a sense of safety and acceptance (Bergman & Bell, 1998; Edgerton & Campbell, 1994; Lee, Brennan & Daly, 2001; Mikulincer & Sahver, 2005). Carl Rogers (1951) indicated that empathy is an essential ingredient in personal health and that empathic skills play a major role in client-centered therapy, because therapists not only need to show their interest in what clients say and how they feel, but also demonstrate an "accurate empathetic understanding." Similarly, empathy is a core ingredient in Relationship Enhancement education, whether for intimate, familial, or professional relationships. Interestingly, building empathy has larger societal implications. For example, in 2007, the World Health Organization (WHO) hosted a meeting entitled the *Third Milestones of a Global Campaign for Violence Prevention*. Empathy was core to the campaign ([http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/events/17\\_07\\_2007/en/](http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/events/17_07_2007/en/)). WHO's Department of Reproductive Health and Research (RHR) also discusses the importance of empathy in distressed mothers (Managing Complications in Pregnancy and Childbirth: A guide for midwives and doctors: [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/impac/Clinical\\_Principles/Emotional\\_support\\_C7\\_C14.html](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/impac/Clinical_Principles/Emotional_support_C7_C14.html)). Similarly, UNICEF teaches empathy as one its core *Life Skills* (Communication Initiative for Young People UNICEF Life Skills: [http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index\\_9009.html](http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_9009.html)).

The Dalai Lama (2001) stated, "In the first step toward a compassionate heart, we must develop our empathy or closeness to others" (p.91). Closeness means more than physical or emotional closeness; it actually means feeling concerned and responsible for another person's well-being as much as for our own well-being. As such, having the ability to truly understand someone, or at least make the effort to see what it is like to "walk in another's' shoes" allows us to build stronger relationships and a kinder, more gentle world. I hope, despite flying bat man figurines, I can not only learn this skill, but teach it to my son.

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