Connecting to Understand: the art of teaching children empathy

Have you ever had a really bad day, you went to tell someone but all they did was tell you how to do to fix it. How much did you want to respond like a two year old? That’s because what you needed was empathy and what they did was the opposite. If you’ve ever had a friend who was good at empathy, you know how valuable that skill is. It’s probably something you want your children to be good at too. Showing empathy to others is one of the foundations to being an emotionally healthy adult. But here’s the thing, empathy isn’t something that we just get, it’s a skill that has to be learned.

That brings us to the question, “how do I teach my kids the skill of empathy?” The answer is kind of simple to understand but really hard to implement.

First thing we have to learn to do is to feel our emotions. That doesn’t mean we become them, we just need to acknowledge them. If I’m sad, I need to recognize that and not dismiss it or push it away with chocolate. When I’m scared, I need to be mindful of that and not just put on my big girl pants and pretend it’s not there. This is important because in order for us to be comfortable with our children’s emotions, we need to be comfortable with our own.

Now if you are anything like me, this is hard because I wasn’t taught how to feel my feelings. Growing up I was taught to push my feelings away or to tell mom and she would rescue me from them (usually with food or a gift). As I’ve learned to feel my emotions and not to brush them away, I’ve gotten better at being with others when they have those feelings.

This bring us to the next step, modeling empathy with our children. If you thought just feeling your own emotions was hard, this is really, really hard. Usually in those moments when our kids get those big emotions, we become our parents.

Everything our parents said or did is repeated by us. When I see those big tears, I start reaching for the ice cream. Your response might be to dismiss their feelings with a “you’re fine, get over it.” Though you are trying to help, this isn’t empathy, and it doesn’t let our children go through the process of learning and healing.

If you got the first step down, now is when you need to use it. Just be with your child and don’t try to problem solve the situation or find a silver lining. This might mean you sit with them and say “you seem anxious, you aren’t sure what that loud sound was” instead of “you’re fine”; you might say “you seem disappointed, you were hoping to have dessert” instead of “you don’t need it anyway”; or you might say “you seem sad, you wish your friend could stay longer” instead of “only babies cry.” By just being there with your child, you allow them to acknowledge their feelings which allows them to move to the next steps of problem solving in a healthy way.

You might be wondering when to start modeling empathy? TODAY! Empathy is a skill we can practice with our infants, when they are upset we can affirm their feelings rather than shush them, “you are scared, you weren’t sure if I was coming back. Breathe with me.” When our toddlers have huge disappointment in the store, we can acknowledge their feeling and support them instead of threaten them. Instead say, “You are upset, you wanted that candy bar. You can handle this.”

When we model this to our children, we are not only teaching them how to process their emotions, but how to notice other’s feelings and show empathy. We our building their social emotional skills and
preparing them to be emotionally healthy adults. So here are the super simple steps: 1- name their emotion (you seem...), 2- why you think they feel that way (you were hoping/wanting...), and 3- then just feel with them.

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