



Notes On the Subject of Empathy

"One who knows how to show and to accept kindness will be a friend better than any possession."

Sophocles

The following notes on the topic of empathy were developed from a variety of sources that offered information, inspiration and understanding regarding the subject. Sources are cited for direct quotations. The remainder of the content is organized and synthesized based on my professional expertise and perspectives as a school safety specialist.

My goal in sharing these notes is to help school community stakeholders deepen their awareness and understanding of empathy and its importance to both the safety and academic missions of a school. The notes can help support the connection of empathy to effective school leadership and responsive classroom relationships. They also demonstrate why the development and practice of empathy in children and youth are key goals in many of today's violence prevention programs.

Included at the end of these notes are two sections designed specifically for classroom use. The first is entitled **Empathy In the Classroom**. This section contains a list of questions to help teachers reflect upon the practice of empathy in the student relationships and learning environments they create. There is also a section entitled **Activities that Teach Empathy**, a list of instructional activities that can be used to help students learn about and build a value for empathy toward others.

The Definition of Empathy

Webster's Dictionary defines empathy as follows:

The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the thoughts, feelings and experience of another of either the past or present, without having the thoughts, feelings or experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; *also* the capacity for this.

Other words used to discuss and define empathy include:

- *Stepping into or experiencing the feelings of others...*
- *Understanding the emotional perspectives of others while maintaining your own perspective...*
- *Imagining oneself in the emotional circumstances of another...*
- *Being aware of and understanding the feelings, perspectives and motivations of others...*



Types of Empathy

The work of Paul Ekman regarding emotions identifies three basic types of empathy:

- **Cognitive empathy** involves simply sensing how another person feels and what they might be thinking, sometimes called perspective taking.
- **Emotional empathy** occurs when a person senses and feels along with the emotions of another.
- **Compassionate empathy** happens when a person senses the feelings of another and is moved to help.

In any given situation it is possible that all three types of empathy might be in play and be dependent on one another as a person shapes their response to the emotional circumstances of another person or group of people.

Three Types of Empathy and School Bullying

Consider the influence of the three types of empathy on the experience of bullying in schools.

Cognitive empathy can help others identify the potential feelings and thoughts of a student who is the target of bullying. These types of information can be used in both helpful and hurtful ways. Potential adult responders and student bystanders can use the information as cues to indicate a problem or wrong-doing. The bully can use the same types of information to make their harmful tactics effective. Adults and bystanders who have been the targets of bullies or bullies themselves may be even better prepared to detect the behaviors and motivations of bullies.

In the case of emotional empathy, potential adult responders and student bystanders can deepen their understanding of the harm of bullying by feeling the pain, fear and frustration of bullying behaviors along with the target or with the bully. It is important for responders and bystanders to be able to manage the deep personal feelings that can be triggered by emotional empathy.

In the case of bullying it is possible that, while feeling cognitive and emotional empathy, responders and bystanders may still choose to remain indifferent to the suffering of the target or the emotional needs of the bully. By the same token strong feelings may cause an over reaction or inappropriate reaction to the problem.

Compassionate empathy in the case of bullying is the response of those responders and bystanders who recognize the targets' feelings, personally understand the targets' feelings and act in ways to help and support targets. A



positive ending to a bullying scenario for both the target and the bully still depends on the appropriateness of what types of actions are taken to respond.

Promoting Emotional Literacy and Empathy

“Some people think only intellect counts: knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship compassion and empathy.” Dean Koontz

- In his book **The Power of Kindness**, Piero Ferruci cites empathy as a prerequisite for effective communication, collaboration and the social cohesion of a community.
- Daniel Goleman introduces us to the world of emotions and the brain in his book **Emotional Intelligence**. Goleman advocates for the idea that schools teach emotional literacy along with regular academic subjects.
- Daniel Goleman’s next book, **Working with Emotional Intelligence**, stresses, for the business world and managers of any kind, the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in workplace leadership and the supervision of others. The book is an important resource for school leaders.
- **Primal Leadership**, another work by Daniel Goleman, identifies the critical role of empathy in times of crisis, healing and recovery. He highlights the empathetic posture of leaders as a critical advantage when guiding others in times of severe emotional distress.
- In his book **Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences**, Howard Gardner writes about interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence. He advocates for their integration into instructional design.

Along with being identified as a desirable quality for leaders and element of the academic and social lives of students, empathy has other benefits. It has been cited as being critical for negotiating and leveraging the diversity of any community with ease, grace and success. Empathy has a role in politics, as it is essential for reading and responding to the social currents in our organizations, communities, and society as a whole. Psychologists have stated that the socialization patterns developed in childhood can last a lifetime. Hence empathetic children have the opportunities to develop into the empathetic adults, community members and world citizens.

While writers and thinkers tout the value of empathy it has also been insightfully noted that the benefits of showing empathy to others is often least understood by those who need it most.

Other Feelings Related to Empathy



**“Remember there’s no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.”
Scott Adams**

Expressions of empathy do not occur in a vacuum. They are closely related to expressions of other personal feelings. These may include but are not limited to:

- Acts of compassion and courage
- Displays of tenderness
- Expressions of kindness and caring
- Positive regard or respect for others
- A sense of fair-play
- The desire for justice

General Steps to Empathy and Acts of Compassion

"How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life, you will have been all of these." George Washington Carver

The following steps and experiences help support the development and practice of empathy. The experiences also create the path that violence prevention specialists identify as a critical learning journey. On such a journey, children and youth are provided with the opportunities to develop the intent to act or react in ways that demonstrate good conscience, in other words to do no harm to themselves or others.

1. Building emotional literacy: an awareness of personal feelings

- Noticing and naming personal feelings and motivations.
- Reflecting upon personal experiences and emotional circumstances
- Accepting positive and difficult feelings including experiences of joy, pride, accomplishment, fear, anger, frustration, loss and sadness.

2. Developing cognitive empathy: being aware of others and their feelings

- Recognizing the roles of those around us as family members, friends, acquaintances or fellow human beings with whom we share our community.
- Noticing cues (verbal or nonverbal) that signal familiar feelings, emotional circumstances and experiences in others.

3. Developing emotional empathy: stepping into the feelings of others

- Using one’s personal experiences to develop perspective and step into the *familiar* feelings and circumstances of others.
- Using one’s general understanding of feelings to develop perspective and project one self into the *unfamiliar* feelings and emotional circumstances of others



4. Demonstrating compassionate empathy: acting appropriately with good conscience

- Accepting and validating the feelings of others. Giving attention and care to the emotional needs of others based on what you understand about your own feelings and needs.
- Choosing to act or react in ways that are appropriate, respectful and do no harm to self or others

Personal and Social Skills of Empathy

The capacity to show empathy toward others requires a person to develop and effectively apply the following personal and social skills

- Communicating interpersonally
- Perspective taking
- Resisting pressure
- Problem solving
- Giving support
- Accessing support
- Advocating
- Managing stress
- Decision making

The Language of Empathy

**“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel.”**

Bonnie Jean Wasmund

Of all that skills that make the expression of empathy possible, interpersonal communication is one of the most important. Along with listening to others the words a person speaks can help elicit and validate the feelings and emotional circumstances of others. Words can not only be used to communicate empathy but can also be used to coach and inspire feelings of empathy in others.

Phrases that communicate empathy:

- *“I want hear what you have to say...”*
- *“Let me help you name your feelings...”*
- *“I notice that you seem to be feeling...”*
- *“Tell me more about...”*
- *“I want to understand what happened...”*
- *“I want to understand your feelings...”*
- *“Share your feelings with me...”*
- *“Can I help you put your feelings in words...”*
- *“Am I hearing you right...”*



- *“Some people feel....others may feel...How do you feel...”*
- *“How were you feeling then...How are you feeling now...”*
- *“I have felt the same way you are feeling...”*
- *“Let me share my feelings and thoughts with you...”*

Phrases that inspire empathy:

- *“How would you feel if...”*
- *“Think about a time this happened to you...”*
- *“What if this had happened to you...”*
- *“Let’s look at it from different view points...”*
- *“Not everyone sees things in the same way...”*
- *“Let’s name the feelings we are talking about...”*
- *“Everyone has feelings...”*
- *“Not everyone shows their feelings in the same way..”*

Empathy In the Classroom

“Two parts of empathy: Skill (tip of iceberg) and Attitude (mass of the iceberg).”

Source Unknown

Assessing the role of empathy in your classroom

The following questions are designed to provide the opportunity for teachers to reflect upon the practices and attitudes that help promote empathy in the settings and relationships of their classrooms. Responses to the questions can be used to affirm current practices or to choose areas for improvement

1. Do you include strategies to pro-actively build and support a sense of classroom community?
2. Are you able to recognize, value, and leverage diversity in your classroom to enhance student relationships and learning experiences?
3. Do you take the time to name feelings and identify emotional circumstances that arise during the teaching day?
4. Do you appropriately use relevant social issues and dilemmas to engage student thinking, reasoning and social problem solving?
5. Do you provide or engage your students in opportunities for service to others?
6. Do your personal attitudes and behaviors model empathy?
7. Do you make yourself aware of and consider the influence of student emotions on the academic and social agendas of the classroom?
8. Do you provide opportunities for students to learn and practice personal and social skills?
9. Do you make curricular connections to empathy in literature, history, art, character education, problem-solving and violence prevention lessons



- (sexual-harassment, bias-based behaviors, bullying, hazing, conflict resolutions, name-calling, foul language and other social incivilities)?
10. Do you help students connect empathy to the practice and benefits of school policies and classroom rules?
 11. Do you model and integrate perspective-taking into classroom lessons and the resolutions of social dilemmas?
 12. Do you speak and model the language of empathy?
 13. Do you actively coach your students to be empathetic?

Activities that Teach Empathy

**“Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair,
but manifestations of strength and resolution.”
Khalil Gibran**

The following learning activities can help support the development of empathy in students. Any effective violence prevention curriculum that promotes the development of empathy should contain these or similar activities.

Students should be provided with the opportunities to:

- Define empathy in their own words.
- Personalize the role and importance of empathy in their relationships and lives.
- Compare and explore the value of empathy among peers.
- Identify the benefits of showing empathy and the consequences of not doing so.
- Build their repertoire of emotions,
- Practice perspective-taking.
- Build awareness of the different ways emotions are expressed by different people.
- Build and practice personal and social skills.
- Work through empathy themed scenarios through role-playing and participation in social problem solving.
- Identify cues that signal the need for empathy.
- Identify systems and sources of support for behaving in empathetic ways.
- Appropriately recognize and celebrate the empathetic actions of others.

**“Instead of making others right or wrong, or bottling up right and wrong in ourselves, there’s a middle way, a very powerful middle way... Could we have no agenda when we walk into a room with another person, not know what to say, not make that person wrong or right. Could we see, hear, feel other people as they really are?”
Pema Chrdon**



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