

# Instilling Empathy in the Early Years

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A good nursery school is one which addresses all areas of children's development, enhances their strengths, helps them to work on areas that may be harder for them, and prepares them well for future academic experiences.

Most important, however, is a school's emphasis on instilling character and empathy towards others. While some children seem to have an unusual capacity to empathize with others, empathy is not only an innate quality: it is a combination of what children learn at home and at school.

That is why the nursery school environment should be one of caring, for it is here that children develop an understanding of emotions, learning to identify and express their feelings. Not only do they observe similar emotions experienced by their classmates, but they also learn to recognize differences in their peers' emotional experience. They often develop and strengthen their own emotional range through observation and imitation.

## **A Conscious Approach**

Social skills are a very important part of the first school learning experience of young children. In our school, this is emphasized throughout the day in all of the classrooms; each child is encouraged by his teachers to gauge his friends' feelings and seek out ways to help them.

If done organically as it arises, it is sometimes helpful to use experience charts to elicit comments from the children about different types of feelings. Another good practice is to show black and white photographs of children with different expressions to begin discussions: What do you think the child in the photo is feeling? Have you ever had this feeling?

Areas of the curriculum or special activities can be used to instill or reinforce empathy for others. For example, our music specialist recently taught the nursery rhyme "Five Little Speckled Frogs" to our youngest group. The song starts out in a very happy manner, the frogs sitting on a log, jumping off one at a time into a pool that is nice and cool. When only one little speckled frog remained, however, the music slowed. The children's concern was immediately reflected in their faces, and in their questions: "Why is he so lonely? Why couldn't he just jump in, were his friends being mean? What will happen to him?" When the little frog finally jumped in to join the others, their sadness turned to joy.

We believe that stories and books can have a powerful impact in teaching compassion. The professional storyteller who visits our classes once a year shares this belief, and always includes a story whose theme is the showing of empathy toward others.

When it comes to picture books, there are certain authors whose work always evokes an emotional response. Mo Willems is a favorite. His books help young children understand feelings, empathy and diversity. A good example is *My Friend is Sad*, in which Piggie tries to cheer her friend Gerald by dressing up—as a clown, a cowboy, a robot—to entertain him. Her disguises are too successful. At first delighted by each of the characters, George becomes even sadder because his friend Piggie is not there to share them with him.

David McKee's stories about Elmer the elephant are another great source to help children appreciate the unique qualities of other people (or, in this case, elephants) and to respect these differences. Unlike all the other elephants in his herd, Elmer's skin is made up of many bright hues, and it makes him sad. But he learns that he doesn't need to hide his beautiful patchwork of colors; in fact, his friends love and appreciate his different colors so much that they create a holiday to celebrate them. A gentle exploration of diversity, the Elmer series teaches children about compassion, sympathy and acceptance of others.

### **Empathy in the Classroom**

Those of us who work in the nursery school environment are intimate observers of frequent displays of empathy that take place between young children. Sometimes we can pinpoint the school's influence on a child's sense of compassion; sometimes we identify practices brought from home. Other times, a child's innate sensitivity rubs off on his classmates. Whatever the source, the result is sometimes amazing and always gratifying.

Recently one of our 3-year-olds had a very hard time separating. His teachers helped him through this difficult process; he became very attached to one who demonstrated particular warmth and patience and understanding of his feelings. Once he did separate, he became an integral part of the classroom, engaging in activities and interacting with friends. When another child had separation issues later on in the year, he was very interested in this child's feelings and the attention he was getting. He showed a great deal of compassion and sensitivity, noticing when his classmate was sad and then when he felt better. It was fascinating to watch him model what he himself had experienced.

In another class, there was one boy who needed a great deal of one-on-one attention, which the class seemed to understand. Once when he started

crying, a little girl in the class who was generally wise beyond her 3 years said to everyone, “We must help each other.” She went over to him, patted his back, said, “I’m sorry,” and then proceeded to sing to him. All of the other children surrounded the crying child and joined in the singing. This child was imitating the words and actions she had seen displayed by her teachers all year. Another little girl in the same class would walk up to any classmate who was upset or crying, quietly pat him or her, and whisper, “It will be okay.”

We have had the misfortune to lose several parents to cancer over the years. One child reacted to his mother’s death by becoming very angry and aggressive. The children in this class were old enough to have been told what had happened. They understood that their friend was very sad and very angry. They saw that their teachers addressed the aggression, but also supported the boy in his terrible distress. His classmates, in turn, tried to help him feel better in their own wonderful ways. These children innately understood that this child needed extra attention from their teachers, and they were able to model the empathy shown at home and at school. I think they also were reassured to know they, too, will get extra attention if they ever need it.

There are so many other spontaneous demonstrations of empathy we observe: A child seems anxious and a friend tries to soothe him. One child sees a friend get very upset and gets her something she wants, perhaps something he has seen her use for sensory soothing in the past. Children ask their teacher to email a family to see why a friend is out of school that day, to check if he is sick. A child who is passing out snack to his classmates one at a time sees that one is getting upset and says, in a soothing manner, “It’s coming, it’s coming.” These are all small but meaningful acts, signs that children are learning how to put themselves in another’s place, and to show compassion.

Years ago the children in our pre-K group voted to elect the kindest child in the class. That the idea for the vote came completely from them was so meaningful. More important, the emphasis they were placing on kindness reflected what they were exposed to at home and at school.

### **The Nursery School Stepping Stone**

For many young children, nursery school is their first foray into the world beyond home and, as such, where they first learn how to relate to others. It begins in the classroom and then expands to the school at large. In our school, we speak of us all being part of a school family, and teach children to refer to those in other classrooms as, for example, their “Sunshine friends,” or their “Rainbow friends.” This helps to build a strong feeling of community, one in which the children look forward to getting together at school sings and special events, or meeting each other in the playground.

Also, especially in an urban setting such as New York City, children and their parents often make their first acquaintance with families from diverse countries and religions. Nursery schools such as ours try to celebrate as many holidays and cultures as we can through books, cooking, art and music. Parents often come in and are involved in these activities.

This adds another level of diversity: A classmate might have a single parent, a mom and a dad, two dads or two moms. Children see that, while each family is different, we are basically the same. Further, in the close-knit community that is nursery school, children learn so much by observing the kindness and caring shown by parents towards their families, their children's classmates, the staff and fellow parents.

The nursery school years can have a powerful impact on a child's budding capacity for empathy. In an unsettled world full of divisiveness, it is more important than ever that children respect differences and are able to be compassionate and empathetic. It is essential that we prepare our children academically for kindergarten, but we can never lose sight of the importance of teaching them to be caring and kind to others. If this is instilled at an early age at home and at school, it will stand them in good stead throughout their childhood and into adult life.

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