

Teaching Empathy

“It was kind of you to share my trouble” • Phil. 4:14



Empathy is a good example of how God's plan for us results in blessings. When we follow God's plan to love each other, we can do so because He first loved us.

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone feels. It is the ability to imagine a situation from another person's point of view and to be able to consider that point of view.

As Christian parents, teaching our children to show empathy is an important faith goal. Jesus teaches us about empathy in the story of the friends of the paralyzed man (Mark 2: 1–5). Friends who could walk, and did not know what it was like to be crippled could see and understand their friend's suffering enough to tear apart a roof for the chance to realize Jesus' healing power. The actions of empathy show evidence of our God-given faith.

The many benefits of empathy

Empathy is more than seeking what is best for others—it can help your child be smarter, happier and more thoughtful.

Children who develop empathy also develop effortful control. Effortful control is the ability to voluntarily manage attention,

even in the face of temptation. This ability is central to attention and concentration in the classroom. Empathy develops this ability because the child often has to set aside his or her own desires, temporarily, to focus on the needs of another person.

Children who practice empathy tend to be happier. Empathy doesn't mean that you always give in to the demands of

others. Children who lack assertiveness typically act out of fear, not empathy. Empathy means you are better able to understand a situation and act accordingly. Successful negotiations are the result of empathy. Fewer mistakes made with friends lead to stronger friendships. Empathetic children are well liked by their peers and often develop strong leadership



skills.

Modeling and discipline

Empathy can be taught in two ways: modeling and discipline. As parents, we know that modeling is an important part of discipline. When we model healthy

behaviors, we focus on what we want our children to do instead of what we want them to stop doing.

Modeling is essential because it is our best teaching technique—if we do not model what we expect of our children, they will not learn what we want them to learn. They will learn what we model for them. There are many ways that parents model empathy, but one of the best ways is to think out loud. Let your child know how you are thinking of others' feelings so he is clearly seeing examples of empathy.

For example, it is great to send homemade treats next door to the widowed neighbor. Just make a point of telling your child why: "Let's take some banana bread over to Mrs. Wilson, she might be lonely. She would probably like a quick visit from us even more than warm banana bread."

Much discipline that happens between parent and child is quick. We need to redirect a toddler headed for trouble or put an unruly child in a time-out to calm down. Many discipline moments offer opportunity to teach empathy. For children younger than about four or five, it works to point out how their actions affected others: "Sally is crying because you took her toy away."

For children about five and older, it is good to ask them to tell you how the other person feels. "I know you hit Billy because you were



angry, but how does Billy feel now?"

Most school-age children are ready to evaluate a situation. It is good to ask them to tell you if the situation is better or worse because of their action: "Tonya called you names, so you took the ball away. Was this the best way to handle the situation? Do you know why Tonya called you names? What could you have done instead?"

This involves complicated thinking. If your child is young or has not been expected to think this way before, you may have to help the process along. Remember to stay calm, even in the face of your child or another child making a poor decision.

God empathized with us

Empathy is a good example of how God's plan for us results in blessings. When we follow God's plan to love each other, we can do so because He first loved us. This blessing allows us to use the gifts God has given us to live a happy, healthy life. This is the blessing we pray for our children. This is the blessing God makes possible.

"Blessed be the God

and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Cor. 1:3–4)

Scripture quotations identified as ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

For Discussion:

- ▶ Think of an argument your child recently had with you or with a friend. Was your child practicing empathy?
- ▶ What understanding of others feelings would have prevented that argument?
- ▶ What examples of empathy does your child readily display?
- ▶ Are there better ways for you to model empathy?

For Further Study:

Lutheran Hour Ministries
From Me to We Parenting:
www.jcparentzone.com/Articles/article.asp?id=12763

