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TEACHING YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD TO PRACTICE EMPATHY

“I can’t understand my kid. He acts so harshly and aggressively at times. He is so critical of other people. He’s like his father.” These are sad words I have heard more than once over the decades of working as a parent counselor. Both parties need empathy, but what is empathy?

Here is what the research says: empathy, correctly employed, is the “connective glue” that holds we humans together.

Empathy, in the form of empathic attunement to our children, is the magic sauce that helps our children feel understood, validated and safe at all times with their parents.

And empathy, properly encouraged in your child, is the one capacity which will allow that child to succeed in current and future relationships.

However, **empathy** must be correctly understood and applied. **Being empathetic does NOT mean being “sympathetic”** to the other person, as in losing oneself while one “feels” their pain, or as in getting lost in your child’s outrage and sense of unfairness and overidentifying with it.

It actually is more of a **cognitive process in which you allow and tolerate your own feelings and sensations while using your understanding to receive emotional/physical signals from your child.** You listen and work at understanding their experience without letting your own unpleasant or intense emotions detract from your efforts. You don’t “identify with” or “hijack” their

experience. You receive it and understand it and tolerate the reality that you will likely have feelings of your own of some type as you temporarily put yourself in the situation they are describing or displaying. But you always focus back on their experience, not your own.

If there is one psychological capacity I encourage parents to develop in their children, it is empathy. **As children develop empathy for others, their behavior towards others becomes more tolerant, less aggressive, less attacking, less bullying.** Research has shown the abysmal failure of behavior modification to alter bullying and aggression in classrooms. But when kids were given empathy training, their behaviors immediately improved.

Are there one or two skills or ideas one can apply if one is interested in developing one's own or one's child's empathy? Yes.

Here are a few ideas for developing your own empathy while teaching your child to develop theirs:

- 1. Use empathy with your child.** Practice listening carefully, reflect back what you hear. Then ask clarifying, non-intrusive questions. Let your child know you have heard them by feeding back to them paraphrases of what you have heard. These reflections include both the content of what the child is sharing and the feelings with which the child is speaking. Parents who paraphrase their child's communications are letting their child know that you have heard them, and have understood them. Even if you are off by a bit, you communicate that you are sincerely seeking to be sure you understand them fully. (*"If I have understood what you are saying, you feel hurt and unfairly treated by your friend."*);
- 2. When speaking to your child about something they said or did which is confusing or upsetting, first pause and settle your emotions.** Then share an "I" message. (*I really want to understand what you are explaining*

to me, but I am confused. I see that you are upset but I'm not sure what your friend's words meant to you that led you to be so upset. Would you be able to tell me more?). "I" messages work much, much better than criticism and blame. Your child will likely feel respected and understood rather than criticized.

3. Gently redirect your child to look at the other person's perspective.

Ask yourself and your child gentle questions which help your child consider another point of view. (*"What do you think your friend or sibling was feeling when she did that?"*). Do not just criticize your child's friend or "sympathize" with your child's immediate, self-referential angry or wounded response. Acknowledge your child's hurt and angry feeling, but then **see if they can go beyond themselves to get a sense of what the other person was likely experiencing.**

4. Always seek to create the widest, broadest lens or perspective you can when trying to understand your child. In short, model and mirror what you want your child to do in their relationships.

5. The widest lens is a perspective that takes you out of yourself and opens your mind to as much of your child's reality as you can apprehend. When you do this with them, they learn to do this with others.

REMEMBER, DEMONSTRATING AND MODELING EMPATHY AS I HAVE OUTLINED ABOVE WILL ABSOLUTELY TEACH YOUR CHILD TO DO THE SAME, IN TIME, IN THEIR IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS.

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