



Raising Empathetic Children

By Ken Sande | www.rw360.org

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My daughter was sitting on the floor in my study crying softly. Megan had been sharing a sad story with me, and her emotions overflowed in tears.

Her two-year-old son, Andrew, was playing in his room nearby. When he heard his mother crying, he pulled some tissues from a Kleenex box, walked into my study, and gently dabbed Megan's cheeks, saying, "It's OK, Mommy! I wipe your tears."

As you can imagine, his kind action triggered a new flood, but these were the happy tears of a mother who sees her child growing in grace.



Empathy Can Start at Two

Andrew's behavior was touching but not unusual.

Most children begin to realize that they are individual persons at around two years of age. This is a key step in seeing other people as distinct persons who have similar experiences and emotions. This realization opens the door to the development of empathy-related behavior, such as giving physical or verbal comfort (as Andrew did with his mother), sharing with others, and distracting people in distress.

If this type of behavior is affirmed and reinforced, a child is likely to grow in empathy and experience fulfilling relationships later in life (see the list of Beneficial Life Outcomes at the end of this post). Here's an example of how such behavior can enrich and deepen our children's lives.

Scan the QR code with your mobile device to view the video clip.



www.rw360.org/empathyv4/

It's a Bumpy Road

This kind of empathy does not appear automatically. Nor does it develop in a smooth, steady progression. Indwelling sin is a constant impediment (as illustrated throughout the Book of Proverbs), which requires a daily [Outpouring of the Gospel](#).

In addition, [our brains are not fully wired until our mid-twenties](#). As a result, a child's ability to show empathy develops in phases. For example, **affective empathy** (the ability to feel what others are feeling) usually develops in a child's early years, while **cognitive empathy** (the ability to imagine what others are experiencing) develops later. In fact, most girls don't see a steady rise in cognitive empathy until age 13. In boys, steady growth is often delayed until around age 15.

Unfortunately, many boys experience a corresponding **decline in affective empathy** between ages 13 and 16. This may result in part because of a spurt of testosterone during puberty, which can spark a desire for dominance and power. Stuffing emotions is also aggravated by pressure to "act like a man," which is often portrayed as being tough, detached, and unshakeable. Teen boys may also suppress empathy so they can join in joking and teasing with peers—the social glue for boys—even if it means hurting others' feelings.

Practical Ways to Promote Empathy

Although some of these growing pains are unavoidable, there is a great deal that parents and other influential adults can do to encourage steady growth in empathy, which is a key component of [other-awareness and relational wisdom](#). Here are few practical tips on how to help children develop this quality.

At All Ages

- **Recognize your unique role as a parent.** Biblical teaching, countless ~~behavior~~ studies, and personal experience all confirm that parents are uniquely positioned to teach empathy to their children. One of the best ways to do so is to develop warm, open, and safe relationships, and to model healthy emotions and empathetic interactions with those around them.
- **Be patient and forgiving** as your child stumbles and grows in relational skills. None of us is able to throw off sin and develop a godly character instantaneously. Since it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4), it is crucial that we offer the same grace to our children (Col. 3:12-15). Here are two short film clips that illustrate how redemptive parental patience can be: [Cinderella Man](#) and [Spanglish](#).
- **Weave the gospel into daily life.** God's gracious sacrifice of his Son for our salvation was the most compassionate event in history. [Refer to the gospel regularly in practical ways](#), not only as the source of our salvation but also as the ultimate model of empathy and the key to our ability to grow in Christ-like character (Titus 2:11-14).
- **Pray without ceasing**, asking God to give your children loving, sensitive, ~~empathic~~ hearts, and to give you grace to model these qualities in your life.

- **Establish a secure and trusting relationship with your child**, showing the same unchangeable commitment to and love for him that God shows to you (Heb. 13:5).
- **Be open with your own emotions** (John 11:35). Use the [READ](#) acrostic to show your children that it's OK to express emotions in reasonable ways, and that there are constructive ways to control and channel them.
- **Model empathy** (1 Cor. 11:1). Apply the [EMPATHY](#) acrostic on a daily basis demonstrate empathy for your children and for other people.

With Young Children

- **Affirm empathetic behavior in your children.** When my grandson wiped away his mother's tears, I said, "Andrew, what a good thing to do! You heard your mommy crying and felt sorry for her. You wanted to comfort her the way she has comforted you. Wiping her tears and saying kind words to her has made her heart glad again." Such praise sends the message, "This is good behavior; keep doing it more and more!"
- **Use Bible stories to illustrate empathy** and show that this quality is pleasing to God (Ruth 1:7-19; 1 Sam. 20:41).
- **Empathize with your child.** ("Are you feeling scared of the bee? I think he's just looking for some food to take back to his home, but he is pretty close and he can sting us. That's scary, so I'll stay close until he flies away.")
- **Talk with your child about others' feelings.** ("Kristen looks sad because no one is playing with her. She probably feels lonely. If you asked her to play with us that would make her happy ... and me too.")
- **Read stories about feelings.** If emotions are not specifically described, ask your child to guess what different characters are feeling at various points in the story.
- **Use pretending to introduce older toddlers to emotion and empathy.** For example, hold two of your child's stuffed toys in your hands and have one of them do something that hurts the others' feelings. Ask your child how the hurt animal feels, and what the other animal could do to take away the hurt.
- **Use role plays to enable your children to practice and learn empathy.** Our [Young Peacemaker Curriculum](#) contains illustrated stories and role plays that are well-suited for such use.
- **Talk openly about your child's unpleasant emotions**, such as sadness, disappointment, fear, or anger. Don't simply condemn the emotion or try to fix the situation. Instead use it as an opportunity to help your child learn how to label her emotions, to understand why they've arisen, and to choose a constructive response. ("Are you afraid to go in the swimming pool. That's OK. I understand, I felt the same way the first time my dad took me swimming. Would you like to just sit on the side of the pool, or do you want me to hold you and walk around in the pool for a little while?")

With Older Children

- **Describe how other people have shown empathy to you**, and explain why you appreciated it.
- **Use books and movies to help children to develop both cognitive empathy and affective empathy** ("Why do you think that character did that?" "What is that person probably thinking and feeling?" "If you were in her shoes, what would you be tempted to do?") You'll find a wide variety of short film clips in our [RW Movie Blog section](#) that show how to use movies this way.
- **Use news reports and current events in the same way.** ("How do you think those people felt when their homes were destroyed by a tornado?" "How do think our soccer players felt when they lost that game? If you were their coach, what would you say to them?")
- **Study and discuss famous empathetic people**, such as Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer, Hudson Taylor, Corrie ten Boom, Oskar Schindler, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Theresa.
- **Expose children to situations that stimulate healthy emotions and compassionate actions**, such as volunteering in the church nursery, mentoring a younger child, visiting a nursing home, working at a local rescue mission, or joining a mission project that serves suffering people.

Beneficial Life Outcomes

Developing empathy is a life-long, time-consuming endeavor, but it is worth the effort. Here are just a few of the long-term benefits of raising empathetic children.

- Their lives are more likely to reflect the character of Christ and be pleasing to God (Eph. 5:1-2).
- Protecting, comforting, and helping others will come more naturally to them (1Thess. 5:14-15). Just think how much you'll appreciate these qualities when your children become your caretakers someday!
- They will have greater social competence, which contributes to deeper friendships and more intimate and stable marriages.
- Behavioral studies show a direct correlation between empathy and knowing right from wrong, as well as creative thinking and problem solving.
- They will be more skilled at team-building, collaborating, negotiating, and conflict resolution, all of which contribute to vocational success and advancement.
- Empathetic people are more likely to be humble, open-minded, and able to connect with and learn from a variety of people, all of which contribute to being a life-long learner.

None of these skills or benefits develops overnight, but with patient and consistent teaching and modeling, both you and your children can experience steady growth in this vital relational quality.

"Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Pet. 3:8).

Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

- Which activities listed above come most naturally to you? How could you build on that ability to encourage empathy in your children?
- Which two or three new activities could help your children to see the value of empathy more clearly and practice it in their lives?

Online Course in Relational Wisdom



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