

Empathy: A Parenting Tool

During social-emotional learning (SEL) this fall, I have been teaching students about empathy in the preschool through fifth grade classes. Middle school students will be learning about this as we go through the unit about bullying prevention in the winter. You can read more about what I'm teaching students about empathy on the [SEL class pages](#) for each grade level. I thought it may be helpful to explain a bit about empathy for OLG parents, too, as it is often confused with sympathy. Empathy builds connection between ourselves and others, while sympathy drives others away from us. Social science researcher Dr. Brene Brown explains this difference well in [this short video](#).

While sympathy is feeling pity or sorrow for someone, having empathy requires so much more of us. To feel empathy, Brown explains, we have to see another person's perspective as their truth, suspend judgment, recognize their emotion, and communicate that understanding back to them. Having empathy means feeling along with another person and taking "a walk in their shoes," as I tell students.

So what does this mean for parenting? When our children are struggling, it is so easy to react in ways we later regret. We yell, we blame, and we shame more often than we care to admit. Stress levels are high, and this so easily bubbles over onto our children. If we can recognize our patterns and catch ourselves at the beginning of this reaction, we can take a step back and give ourselves a moment to take a deep breath and choose a better path forward - empathy.

Here are some steps to try:

- Get close to your child and make eye contact. If your child won't let you be close, tell them you're here for him/her when the child is ready and stay nearby.
- Focus on listening and try to keep your words sparse. Reflect what he/she says to you by summarizing your child's perspective.
- Validate your child's emotion, showing acceptance of what they're feeling. "You're (feeling word) right now."
- Show compassionate curiosity to understand. "Can you tell me more about...?"
- No judging. No fixing. No rushing. No changing.
- Show empathy - really imagine your child's perspective and feel with him/her.
- Offer warm affection but don't demand it.
- AFTER you and your child are both calm, then you can problem solve together, if needed.

By sharing your empathy with your child and feeling along with them, you will strengthen your bond and make it easier to work on their behavior choices later on. Empathy allows children to see you as their ally and someone who can support them through difficult times. This certainly is not easy and takes a lot of patience and hard work. If you would like to have help, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. We're all in this together!

References:

Baer, Mark. (2016, November 29). [Not All Empathy Is The Same](#). *Psychology Today*.

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