CHAPTER 6

KDI 10. Empathy
How Empathy Develops

Empathy is the ability to understand another person’s feelings by experiencing the same emotion ourselves. To be empathic, we must be able to see a situation from someone else’s perspective, to “put ourselves in their shoes.” Seeing things from another perspective is a cognitive as well as a social-emotional skill. For example, to give directions to our house, we must think about where the other person is coming from. What differentiates empathy from other types of perspective-taking is that empathy involves emotions as well as cognitive or intellectual processes.

Piaget (1950) called this process “decentering,” because it means shifting from an egocentric view of the world to taking a position outside oneself. Empathy involves imagining or forming a mental representation of how things look or feel to someone else. Preschoolers are developing this ability and can make educated guesses by projecting their own feelings onto others.

At snacktime, Dulce says that she will share her Halloween pumpkin bucket with Iva because Iva does not have one. “She might cry if nobody gave her candy.”

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Today is Connor’s first day at school. At work time, he stands at the side of the room. Jamaica leaves her friends in the house area and walks over to him. “You don’t have any friends, so you can play with us,” she says. She takes his hand, leads him to the house area, and says, “He can be the baby.” She hands him a bottle, pats his arm, and tucks a blanket around him.

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At work time in the art area, Casey sees that his friend Xavier is upset and says, “Come play with me at the water table. It will help make you happy.”

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At work time in the block area, when Kovid crawls over Senguele’s body, she starts to cry. Kovid rubs her back to comfort her. “Okay now?” he asks after a while, and she nods.
At greeting time, while reading a book to several children, Mrs. Mel turns to the picture of Buttons McKitty being sad on a rainy day. Chelsea says, “Cats don’t like to get wet.” “I wonder why that is,” the teacher asks. “It tickles their whiskers,” says Brady, “and that feels bad. I don’t like to be tickled either.”

**When empathy begins**

Because of the complex mental processes involved, developmental psychologists debated for many years whether young children were capable of empathy. Yet research spanning over three decades (e.g., Marvin, Greenberg, & Mossler, 1976; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Sadovsky, 2006) challenges previous notions that empathy does not appear until age seven, the beginning of concrete operations. In fact, toddlers, and even infants, exhibit early signs of empathic behavior, while empathy in preschoolers can be quite sophisticated.

For example, research reviewed in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000) shows that babies are interested in one another from at least as early as two months of age. Infants get excited by the sight of other babies and stare avidly at one another. In the middle of the first year of life, they match their behavior to the emotional expressions of significant others (for example, approaching a smiling caregiver or turning away from one who is frowning). These young children are capable of taking another person’s perspective. This child soothes a friend who is tired and upset.
early signs of “social referencing” are a precursor of empathy and are rooted in both genetic factors, such as temperament, and environmental factors, especially parenting (Emde, 1998).

**How young children display empathy**

Toddlers display empathy by orienting themselves to sounds of distress, looking to see what is happening, showing emotional arousal (such as facial expressions), and doing prosocial things such as helping, soothing, or sharing (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). They not only grasp that helping people who are hurt is important, they understand that causing hurt is bad and begin to create a rudimentary system of moral behavior.

*When Kelsey, aged 20 months, sees another child frowning near the water table, she walks over to her and says, “What matter?”*

By age three, preschoolers are capable of perceptual perspective taking. They make inferences about what others see or hear. Four-year-olds exhibit conceptual perspective taking. They infer other people’s internal or intangible experiences such as their thoughts, desires, and feelings.

*During outside time, Shawna is upset because her mother has left. Emily says, while patting Shawna’s shoulder, “That’s okay, your mommy will be back at outside time. When I’m sad, I make a picture for my mommy. Want to go make one for your mommy?”*

According to psychologists Charles McCoy and John Masters (1985), “Young children can recognize emotions in other children, have common ideas about how experience influences affect, and are often motivated to intervene in others’ emotional states” (p. 1214). They exercise these capacities because they have the ability to represent and pretend. Psychologist Paul Harris (1989) observes that this ability “allows children to engage in an imaginative understanding of other people’s mental states. Given their capacity for pretend play, children can imagine wanting something they do not actually want. They can also imagine believing something they do not actually believe. On the basis of such simple pretend premises, they can proceed to imagine the emotional reactions of another person who does have such a desire or belief” (p. 55).

*Anna’s cousin is visiting for the day. “I can see you’re not feeling so good,” Kenneth says to her at the beginning of work time. “You’re new here.” He gives her a “magic hat that makes you feel better.”*

*At snack time, when Ella sees another child crying, she asks, “Is he sad because he wants his mommy?”*

*At work time in the house area, Anna says to Kenneth, “You’re the doctor and I’m sick. You have to give me a shot. It’s going to hurt a lot. I don’t like to get shots.”*

Families are critical in developing a child’s capacity for empathy (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Parents model empathic behavior and help children become aware of the perspectives of siblings, peers, and adults. Studies find that the more parents fulfill children’s emotional needs, the better able children are to empathize with and meet the needs of others (Atance, Bélanger, & Meltzoff, 2010). However, as young children move into group care settings, their interactions with teachers and peers also influence their social perspective-taking. The cognitive skills promoted by early childhood programs further support the social skills that underlie empathy.
Teaching Strategies That Support Empathy

To support young children as they experience and express empathy, adults can use the following teaching strategies.

Model caring behavior

Preschoolers begin to learn empathy by imitating the caring behaviors of the adults around them. To create an empathic classroom, respond to the needs of children who are scared, hurt, angry, or otherwise upset. Use words, facial expressions, and body language to show you understand their feelings, and accept responsibility for helping children deal with them. To help preschoolers understand the reasons for your behavior, describe what you see and the actions you are taking.

Devon sees his teacher Hal give a teddy bear to Jason, who cries when his father drops him off. Hal holds Jason in his lap until he calms down and is ready to join others in play. The next day, Devon sees Susan crying after her mother leaves. He brings her a cuddly toy and pats her arm. They sit quietly together, then walk to the toy area and begin to work on puzzles.

At greeting time, the teacher explains to a group of children who are watching, “I’m moving over to make room for Taryn because she looks upset that she can’t find a place to sit.”

Individualize the type of comfort you provide based on your knowledge of what is effective for each child. Some are soothed by physical contact such as a hug or stroking. Others prefer to have a brief talk about what is bothering them. There are times when just standing nearby is all a child needs. Observe and adjust your response. Sometimes children just want their feelings recognized, while in other instances they want help solving the problem at the root of their distress.

At work time in the house area, Amelia pretends she is a cat and begins to hiss. Shannon, her teacher, asks why she is hissing. Amelia says “The kitty is scared. There’s lots of sounds,” and she points to the children nearby. Shannon asks what the kitty could do to be less scared. Amelia answers, “Make a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign and hang it on the chair.” She gets paper and markers, writes “do” and “not,” and asks Shannon to help her spell “disturb.” Then she tapes the sign to a chair. When the other children ask what the sign says and Amelia explains it to them, they talk in whispers. Amelia, still pretending to be a kitty, does not hiss again.

It is also important to respond positively to children who express their needs in potentially annoying or even harmful ways, such

This teacher models empathic listening with this child.
as following a teacher around, clinging to her leg, pouting silently, talking nonstop, throwing toys, or hitting. These children are seeking adult attention and reassurance, but have not yet learned more positive ways to express themselves. By responding to their needs — with understanding, patience, caring, and creativity — we can ultimately free them to engage in more satisfying interactions with adults and peers. We also show the other children in the classroom that everyone deserves compassion and caring and is capable of providing it too.

**Acknowledge and label the feelings that children have in common**

Although preschoolers are capable of empathy, they are still bound up in their own emotions. Adults can help them become aware that others share these feelings. Be concrete. Focus on the situation and the fact that others have the same emotions under similar circumstances. Young children can then understand and even anticipate others’ responses by recalling their own experiences.

*At outside time, the teacher says, “Claudia, you are frustrated because you want a turn on the swings but other children are on them. This might be how Tommy felt when he was waiting for you to finish your turn at the computer during work time.”*

Children are most likely to feel empathy in response to people with whom they are close. When these significant others include those who provide the care they depend upon, such as parents and caregivers, it is not uncommon for the child’s own anxiety to trigger an empathic response:

*At work time in the writing area, Aubrey asks her teacher to help her write on a card she is making for her daddy, “I hope you don’t get a cold like Mommy and me.”*

*At message board, Mr. Brian (a teacher) tells the children that Miss Natalie (the other teacher) will be out sick that day. At work time, Nicholas makes her a get-well card.*

Mr. Brian: You drew her head.
Nicholas: And a heart.
Mr. Brian: What does the heart mean?
Nicholas: I made Miss Natalie a heart because I’m so sad and I hope she feels better.

Children are also more likely to show compassion toward friends with whom they regularly play than toward other peers. They not only express concern about playmates who are ill or upset, they may also display remorse if they feel responsible for a friend’s distress. In such cases, apologies (saying “I’m sorry”) can be spontaneous and genuine, because they are not coerced by adults.

*At work time in the art area, Shelby uses tape, scissors, paper, and muffin cups to make a card for her friend Abby, who is having surgery that day. Her teacher comments, “You used four different things to let your friend in the hospital know you’re thinking about her.” “I hope she will be okay,” says Shelby, “because I know she wants to come back and play with me.”*

*While carrying his paint cup to the sink, Quentin drips some on Daryl’s sneaker. “My new shoes,” Daryl cries, upset. “I’m sorry,” says Quentin. ‘I’ll wipe it off.” He uses a wet paper towel to wipe off the paint. “Now your mommy won’t be mad you got your shoe dirty.”*
Create opportunities for children to act with empathy

Like other social and emotional skills, learning to feel empathy takes practice. Create situations where children are explicitly encouraged to listen and think about the feelings of others. For example, suppose the message board says a child is out sick on a day the class is taking a field trip to the pumpkin patch. Invite the children to choose a pumpkin for the child who isn’t there, thus encouraging them to think about someone they know who is having a different experience.

Another strategy for developing empathy is to encourage children to assist one another, for example, to hold a cup steady while another child pours, bend to pick up something dropped by a child in a wheelchair, or help a child who asks how to write his name. By encouraging all children to be helpful, without differentiating providers or recipients by age or ability level, adults help children accept that everyone needs — and can offer — assistance. Taking care of plants and animals can also help children appreciate how their actions affect the survival and well-being of others.

At work time, Malika tells her teacher, “I’m worried about Fuzzball [the class guinea pig]. I think someone forgot to feed him yesterday.” When the teacher asks what makes her think so, Malika answers, “He’s just sleeping all morning. He’s hungry, tired and hungry.” Malika puts food and water in the guinea pig’s dish. “Eat up,” she whispers to him, “I got it just for you.” She keeps quiet watch over the cage another 10 minutes, until the animal wakes up and eats and drinks. Malika runs to her teacher and says excitedly, “Fuzzball is okay now!”

Practice perspective-taking in nonsocial situations

Since adopting other viewpoints is the cognitive basis of empathy, introduce perspective-taking activities that involve objects and actions as well as people. For example, science activities can encourage children to explore things from different angles. At outside time, ask children what they notice about a bush when they stare straight at it, look up from the ground, or gaze down from the climber. Gathering data, a mathematics activity, highlights differences of opinion. Making a chart about favorite colors reveals that some children like red, others are partial to blue or green, and some have no preference. Reading presents many opportunities for
perspective-taking. Talk about what characters are thinking and feeling, or what they see or hear from various locations in the story.

*Looking at a book of farm animals, Ben says, “These are inside the barn and those are outside. The other ones want to get inside.”* When his teacher asks how they could get inside, Lily pipes up, “They can’t because the outside ones are wild.” Ben says, “The farmer could adopt them.” Lily thinks this over. “Then the inside ones could have brothers and sisters.”

Being the leader in movement activities also helps preschoolers consider other perspectives. When they give directions using words, rather than just demonstrating what to do, they have to put themselves in the place of those receiving instructions. For example, it may be observable that the child who is leading is bending down, so the others imitate this movement. However, if the leader specifically wants them to touch their toes, he or she will have to say so to be clear.

Finally, many art activities involve perspective-taking. When children build structures with three-dimensional materials, encourage them to view it — even take photos — from many angles. As children look at artwork, ask them to consider what the artist wanted to say or why he or she chose certain materials. These discussions not only encourage children to reflect on the perspectives of the maker and viewer, they can also tap into the feelings that art evokes, furthering the foundations of social understanding.

*At work time in the art area, Monique paints a blue sky with a white streak in it and calls it a “jet stream.” She tells her teacher, “Jets fly over my house upside down and sideways. Pilots can’t see me when they’re upside down.” Her teacher asks what they do see. Monique replies, “I think they see God up there.”*

For examples of how young children express empathy at different stages of development and how adults can scaffold learning in this KDI, see “Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 10. Empathy.” The ideas suggested in the chart will help you support and gently extend young children’s capacity for empathy as you play and otherwise interact with them throughout the program day.
## Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 10. Empathy

Always support children at their current level and occasionally offer a gentle extension.

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<td>• See only their own perspective in play situations (e.g., sit in the middle of another child's train track because they want to play with the blocks on the nearby shelf).</td>
<td>• Label the perspective of others (e.g., Landon notices Matthew just sitting on the swing and tells the teacher that Matthew needs a push).</td>
<td>• Adapt what they are doing based on their understanding of someone else's perspective (e.g., Abby stops splashing at the water table when Joshua says it's getting his hair wet).</td>
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<td>• Be aware of another child's emotions; may ask adult the reason (e.g., stop what they are doing to look at a child who is excited or upset; ask the teacher “Why is she laughing?” or “Why is he crying?”).</td>
<td>• Exhibit caring behavior in response to another child’s emotions (e.g., laugh with another child; bring a teddy bear to a crying child).</td>
<td>• State why they showed caring behavior to another child (e.g., “I hugged her because it’s her birthday”; “I brought Theo the teddy bear because he misses his mommy”).</td>
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<td>• Label and explain children’s own perspectives to them (e.g., “You chose to go to the block area because you really like building things”).</td>
<td>• Explain others’ perspectives (e.g., “Joey also wants a turn at the computer”).</td>
<td>• Acknowledge when children adapt their behavior based on another’s perspective (e.g., “Justin, you moved to make room for Caprice”).</td>
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<td>• Label other children’s emotions (e.g., “You’re excited because your grandma is coming for dinner tonight”).</td>
<td>• Acknowledge when children exhibit caring behavior (e.g., “You saw Alec was crying, so you helped him wipe up the spilled paint”).</td>
<td>• Provide opportunities for children to explain their caring behavior (e.g., “Alicia, you gave Tommy a hug. I’m wondering why”).</td>
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<td>• Call attention to similarities and differences among children’s perspectives (e.g., “Kailee also likes to do puzzles. You like to do the big floor puzzles; she likes to do the wooden puzzles”).</td>
<td>• Look for opportunities to connect other children’s perspectives with possible actions (e.g., “It looks like Mikey is trying to carry the heavy tire up the hill. He could probably use more people to help him”).</td>
<td>• Help children anticipate the perspective of others (e.g., “Anna broke her arm. It’s in a cast and she needs to keep it very still. What can we do when she comes back to help keep her arm safe?”).</td>
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<td>• Model and label caring behavior (e.g., “Chelsea had a lot of blocks to clean up so I offered to put some away”).</td>
<td>• Look for opportunities to encourage children to exhibit caring behavior (e.g., “It looks like the fish need to be fed. They get hungry like us. I wonder what we could do”).</td>
<td>• Encourage children to recall and describe similar situations and the feelings they evoked (e.g., “Do you remember when you were little? How did you feel about going to the top of the climber?”).</td>
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