


## UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT CULTURES: BUILDING EMPATHY IN A DIVERSE WORLD

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### ABSTRACT

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling in a particular situation and respond with care. This article describes the value of empathy, emphasizes the role of education and experiences in developing empathy, and describes many teaching and learning activities that foster empathy. Ethnocultural empathy is directed toward people from cultural groups other than one's own. It is important to develop empathy for diverse cultures to build connections and create a more understanding world. Learning about distinct cultures can lead to appreciation for the beauty of diversity and respect for people from various backgrounds. Overall, a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences can impede the development of empathy. Researchers have emphasized the importance of exposure to diverse environments in cultivating empathy, as individuals are more likely to empathize with others when they have a better understanding of their unique circumstances and challenges.

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## Introduction

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling in a particular situation and respond with care. This is a complex skill to develop. Empathy allows people to build social connections with others. By understanding what people are thinking and feeling, people may respond appropriately in social situations. Research has shown that social connections are important for both physical and psychological well-being (Hoffman, 2000; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009).

Ethnocultural empathy is directed toward people from cultural groups other than one's own. It is important to develop empathy for diverse cultures to build connections and create a more understanding world. Learning about distinct cultures can lead to appreciation for the beauty of diversity and respect for people from various backgrounds (Dasgupta and Greenwald, 2001).

The ability to empathize with another person means that a person:

- *Understands that people are separate individuals; each one is an individual person.*
- *Understands that others can have thoughts and feelings different from oneself.*
- *Recognizes the common feelings that most people experience—happiness, surprise, anger, disappointment, sadness, etc.*
- *Can look at a particular situation and imagine how each person might feel in this moment; and*
- *Imagines a response that might be appropriate or comforting in that situation.*

## Milestones in child development

Understanding and showing empathy is the result of many social-emotional skills that are developing in the early years of life. Some especially important early milestones

are described in Figure 1 (Decety and Ickes, 2009; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998). By sharing others' feelings, children cultivate compassion.

### Figure 1.

#### Milestones for Empathy in Early Development

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- Establishing a secure, strong, loving relationship with parents is one of the first milestones. Feeling accepted and understood by caregivers will help a child learn how to accept and understand others as he grows.

- Babies use social referencing ~ 6 months old. This is when a baby will look to a parent or other loved one to gauge his or her reaction to a person or situation. For example, a 7-month-old looks carefully at her father as he greets a visitor to their home to see if this new person is good and safe. The parent's response to the visitor influences how the baby responds. (This is why parents are encouraged to be upbeat and reassuring—not anxiously hover—when saying good-bye to children at childcare. It sends the messages that “this is a good place” and “you will be okay.”) Social referencing or being sensitive to a parent's reaction in new situations, helps the babies understand the world and the people around them.

- Toddlers develop a theory of mind ~ 18 - 24 months old. This is when a toddler first realizes that, just as he has his own thoughts, feelings and goals, others have their own thoughts and ideas, and these may be different from his. When toddlers recognize themselves in a mirror, the children are showing a firm understanding of self as a separate person.

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*Note:* These milestones are adapted from Decety and Ickes, 2009, and Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998.

As described in Figure 1, empathy develops during childhood. Infants start by imitating caregivers' emotions, which is a rudimentary form of empathy. Toddlerhood marks the beginnings of empathetic responses, demonstrated through comforting gestures to others. Through social interactions and adult guidance, preschool children understand diverse emotional states and show empathy when their peers show distress. As children grow, they grasp the perspectives of others and realize diverse emotions beyond their own experience. Adults can encourage perspective-taking, model empathetic behaviors, and foster emotional literacy.

### **Personal experiences and communication**

Firsthand experiences can shape our understanding of unfamiliar cultures. For instance, making friends from distinct cultures or traveling to different countries can help us see the world from their perspective. These experiences can make us more open-minded and understanding.

Individual experiences play a pivotal role in fostering the development of empathy, enabling individuals to relate to and understand the emotions and struggles of others. Through firsthand encounters with adversity, individuals gain a deeper appreciation for the challenges and complexities of the human experience, thereby cultivating a heightened sense of empathy and compassion (Galinsky and Moskowitz, 2000).

Exposure to diverse cultural and social environments broadens individuals' perspectives and nurtures a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in various communities. By engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds and immersing themselves in diverse cultural contexts, individuals develop a heightened awareness of the unique challenges and triumphs experienced by people from different walks of life. The work of Nelson (2009) underscores the significance of cross-cultural experiences in fostering empathy and promoting a more inclusive worldview.

Personal interactions with individuals facing adversity or marginalized communities can significantly impact an individual's capacity for empathy. Through volunteer work, community service, or advocacy efforts, individuals gain firsthand insights into the struggles and resilience of marginalized populations, thereby fostering a profound sense of empathy and a commitment to social justice. Several reports (Handy et al., 2010; Spencer, Cox-Petersen; and Crawford, 2005) highlight the transformative impact of volunteering on individuals' empathy levels, indicating that active engagement with communities in need can foster a greater sense of compassion and understanding. By embracing experiences and actively seeking opportunities for personal growth and understanding, individuals can cultivate a heightened sense of empathy, contributing to a more compassionate and interconnected society.

### **Overcoming challenges to developing empathy**

Stereotypes and prejudices make it difficult to develop empathy (Batson et al., 1997). Stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about groups of people, while prejudices are negative feelings or attitudes towards others based on their differences. Overcoming these challenges is important in developing genuine connections with people from distinct cultures. It involves being aware of our own biases and actively working to overcome them. Respect and open-mindedness in our interactions with people from diverse cultures are essential.

Psychological, social, and cultural factors might also make it challenging to understand and share feelings. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for fostering positive interpersonal relationships and creating a more inclusive and compassionate society. One significant challenge is the presence of implicit biases, which can stem from cultural upbringing, societal stereotypes, or firsthand experiences. Research by Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) highlights the pervasive nature of implicit biases and their role in hindering empathetic responses to individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences can impede the development of empathy. Studies by Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000)

emphasize the importance of exposure to diverse environments in cultivating empathy, as individuals are more likely to empathize with others when they have a better understanding of their unique circumstances and challenges. Moreover, the fast-paced nature of modern life often leaves individuals with limited time for meaningful interactions, which can diminish opportunities for practicing empathy.

Strategies such as perspective-taking interventions have been shown to mitigate these challenges. Such activities can help individuals become more attuned to their emotions and those of others, fostering a deeper sense of empathy. Furthermore, perspective-taking interventions, as outlined by Batson and colleagues (1997), encourage individuals to adopt the perspectives of others, thus reducing biases and enhancing empathetic responses.

Cultivating empathy also requires creating inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and encourage open dialogue. Educational initiatives promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication, advocated by Banks (2009) and Sleeter (2011), play a role in fostering empathy among individuals from diverse backgrounds. By embracing these approaches, individuals can overcome the challenges to developing empathy and contribute to the creation of a more compassionate and interconnected global community.

### **The role of education**

Education plays an important role in the development of empathy, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and nurturing a sense of compassion and understanding. By incorporating empathetic learning practices into educational curricula, institutions can cultivate an environment that encourages open-mindedness and inclusivity. Research by Borba (2016) emphasizes the significance of social-emotional learning programs in schools, highlighting their positive impact on enhancing students' emotional intelligence and empathy.

A multicultural curriculum can celebrate diversity and promote cross-cultural understanding. By incorporating literature, history, and arts from various cultural

backgrounds, educators can encourage students to empathize with individuals from different communities. Thus, students are more likely to grasp the complexities of experiences of those other communities. The work of Sleeter (2011) underscores the importance of multicultural education in fostering empathy and promoting social justice in educational settings.

Also, the implementation of interactive and collaborative learning experiences can encourage students to develop empathy through active engagement with their peers. Group discussions, community service projects, and collaborative problem-solving activities enable students to appreciate the perspectives of others, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and cooperation. The research conducted by many investigators highlights the benefits of cooperative learning in promoting empathy and enhancing interpersonal relationships among students (Cushner and Mahon, 2009; Deardorff, 2020; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009).

The incorporation of mindfulness practices and emotional literacy training in educational settings can equip students with the necessary tools to understand and manage their emotions, leading to improved empathetic responses. The study by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) demonstrates the efficacy of mindfulness-based programs in schools, indicating their role in promoting emotional well-being and empathy among students.

By prioritizing these approaches within the educational framework, institutions can nurture a generation of empathetic and socially conscious individuals who are equipped to contribute positively to their communities and the broader global society.

## **Conclusion**

Embracing diversity and developing empathy for diverse cultures are vital for creating a more inclusive and understanding world. Through education, individual experiences, and effective communication, we can build bridges between cultures and form meaningful connections with people from diverse backgrounds. In general, exposure to diverse environments should lead individuals to be more likely to empathize with

others because they will have a better understanding of their unique circumstances and challenges.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix A

### Actions to nurture empathy

- Empathize with children. For example, “Are you feeling scared of that dog? He is a nice dog, but he is barking loud. That can be scary. I will hold you until he walks by.”

- Talk openly about emotions rather than dismissing or burying them. Let us say a child fears the dark. Instead of saying, “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” explore the child’s feelings: “Are you scared of the dark? What scares you about the dark?” If a child does not like another child, do not immediately say, “That’s wrong,” but ask why the child feels that way. This can lead to a discussion about the other child’s actions and *why* the child might be acting that way (e.g., They just moved to a new school and are feeling angry because they miss their old school and their friends).

- Validate children’s difficult emotions. Sometimes when children are sad, angry, or disappointed, adults rush to try and fix it right away, to make the feelings go away and protect them from any pain. However, these feelings are part of life, and children need to learn to handle these feelings. In fact, labeling and validating difficult feelings help children learn to manage them: “You are really mad that I turned off the TV. I understand. You love watching your animal show. It is okay to feel mad. When you are done being mad, you can choose to help me make a delicious lunch or play in the kitchen while mommy makes our sandwiches.” This type of approach also helps children learn to empathize with others who are experiencing difficult feelings.

- Never punish a child for feeling sad or angry. Make it clear that all emotions are welcome and learn to manage them in a healthy way through discussion and reflection.

- Be patient. Developing empathy takes time. Children will not be perfectly empathetic beings even by age three. (There are some teenagers and even adults who have not mastered this skill completely either!) In fact, a big and very normal part of being a

young child is focusing on me, mine, and I. Remember, empathy is a complex skill and will continue to develop across a child's life.

- Learn how to identify feelings. Introduce children to simple feelings like sad, happy, angry, and so on. This is an initial step in building their vocabulary which allows them to comprehend more complex feelings later. Talk to children about the different feelings and see how many they can list. Then, write the feelings down. Also, talk about the other synonyms for various feelings.

- Help them recognize body language and facial expressions. Feelings charts for adults and children have illustrations that show body language and facial expressions of different feelings. Although the expressions on the chart could be more exaggerated than what occurs in real life, they still help children learn.

- Pantomime or act out the different feelings. Children want to get amused and learn more about their emotional expressions using a mirror. With this, they can see through their faces what faces look like when one is sad, happy, scared, mad, and so on. Play charades and act out different feelings.

- Help children learn about feelings in a non-verbal way. Children can have a challenging time opening and sharing their feelings, especially the negative ones. Telling others that one is mad, sad or needs help can make a person feel vulnerable. Both adults and children can struggle on the issue of opening and sharing their feelings. Moreover, children with special needs are often non-verbal, meaning they cannot share their feelings using words. When children cannot express their feelings with words and do not know any other effective ways to share, they might resort to behavior as their means of communication and act out in undesirable or negative ways.

- Use pretend play. Talk with children about feelings and empathy during play. For example, have the child's stuffed hippo say that he does not want to take turns with his friend, the stuffed pony. Then ask the child: "How do you think the pony feels? What should we tell this silly hippo?"

- Use “I” messages. This type of communication models the importance of self-awareness: “I do not like it when you hit me. It hurts.”
- Talk about others’ feelings. For example, “Kayla is feeling sad because you took her toy car. Please give Kayla back her car and then you choose another one to play with.”
- Suggest how children can show empathy. For example, “Let’s get Jason some ice for his boo-boo.” When a child shows empathy for others, praise the behavior. Focusing on and encouraging empathetic behavior encourages more of it in the future. Make the praise specific: “You brought your sister a Band-Aid for her scraped knee so she could feel better. That was so kind and helpful!”
- Play with children. Play is always associated with childhood and is also a language that most children love and understand. They can navigate different worlds through play. After children watch a movie, adults might observe them replaying the scenes in their own imaginative way. Move things along by participating in their play activities.
- Be a role model. When adults have strong, respectful relationships and interact with others in a kind and caring way, children can learn by example. It is important that adults be models for empathy. This way, the child understands what empathy looks like, sounds like, and feels like. Plus, it is easier to teach a skill that adults have already mastered. Remember to model empathy even when upset with or giving consequences to a child. This reinforces the idea that empathy can and should be used even when one is feeling disappointed, hurt, or angry. The more children receive empathy, the more likely they are to offer it to others.
- Help at home, in the community, or globally. Helping others develop kindness and caring. It can also give children the opportunity to interact with people of diverse backgrounds, ages, and circumstances, making it easier to show empathy for all people.

- Think through how to use “I’m sorry.” Adults often insist that young children say “I’m sorry” as a way for them to take responsibility for their actions. But many youngsters do not fully understand what these words mean. While it may feel “right” for them to say, “I’m sorry,” it does not necessarily help them learn empathy. A more meaningful approach can be to help children focus on the other person’s feelings: “Chandra, look at Sierra—she is sad. She is crying. She is rubbing her arm where you pushed her. Let us see if she is okay.” This helps children make the connection between the action (shoving) and the reaction (a friend who is sad and crying).

- Read stories about feelings.

- Watch the movie “Inside Out.” Many families love movie night, and it is an excellent activity for homeschooling. The Disney movie “Inside Out” is a notable example of an educational film to watch with children. The film presents incredibly deep insights and thoughtful conversation. The movie also fuels creativity; children can play games and use a feeling chart inspired by the movie.

- *Create a feelings chart. Make a feelings chart by following these steps:*

Choose the feelings to include in a chart. Start by identifying the feelings on which to focus. Start with primary feelings, like happy, sad, or mad. If a child has mastered the basics, go for the more complex feelings like frustrated, embarrassed, silly, confused, or worried. Now, gather the images of real children showing the selected emotions. Take photos of your own children or download stock images of children and print them out. Put the chart together. Stick the photos in a chart and write the corresponding feeling represented by each of the faces. Post the chart in a place where children can easily access it. That way, children can look at it and use it even without help.