TEACHING CHILDREN EMPATHY

By M. Sue Bergin (BA '78)

As coaches and models, parents can help children learn about others' feelings.

FOUR-YEAR-OLD Jacob sprawls on the floor with his toy fire engine, whizzing it across the carpet with enthusiastic "zooms." His sister, 2-year-old Carolyn, grabs the fire engine and starts her own version of zoom. Jacob yanks the toy back and smacks Carolyn on the head with it. Carolyn's screeches bring Dad running into the room. Once he's calmed both children, he has several options for how to proceed. They include the following:

A. Put Jacob in time-out for hurting Carolyn.
B. Put Carolyn in time-out for taking Jacob's toy.
C. Put both children in time-out.
D. Talk with Jacob about how he would feel if *he* had been hit on the head. And talk with Carolyn about how she would feel if Jacob had taken *her* toy.

Many family experts would argue that this situation is a prime opportunity for option D—to teach both children empathy, a skill that is critical to sound moral and emotional development. Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of others and, at least to some degree, feel what they feel and respond in helpful ways.

"Empathy is one of the foundational moral emotions," says Laura Padilla Walker, assistant professor in the School of Family Life. "It is linked to moral action. It's a feeling that compels people to act compassionately while reasoning alone might not."

Children who don't develop empathy can become callous adults, oblivious to the hurt and pain they leave in their wake. Researchers say that empathy, like other emotions such as guilt, is not something that matures on its own—it must be learned. Parents play an important role in helping their children acquire empathy by guiding them toward it from infancy, by acting as an "emotion coach," and by setting an example of empathetic behavior.

The Earlier the Better

While some children seem to develop empathy more naturally than others, all children need help for this skill to grow. Parents should begin teaching them as early as possible, says Walker, who studies the parent-child relationship as it relates to moral development.

Children as young as 18 months can understand parents when they teach about empathy, and some experts argue that children display empathetic responses as early as infancy. Although it may take many years for a child's empathy to

mature, Walker says that starting empathy training early does two important things: it gets parents into the habit of noticing teaching moments and seizing them, and it creates for children a seamless transition from understanding verbal instructions to later being able to act.

"For example, if a young child sees another child fall down on the playground, that child may spontaneously react in an empathetic way, such as providing comfort and support, as a result of previous instruction and teaching moments with parents," says Walker.

As parents teach their young children about empathy, they might notice that girls tend to be more empathetic than boys. Research, in fact, shows that girls from grade school age through adolescence tend to score higher on measures of empathy than do boys of the same ages. Walker says the reasons for these differences are unclear, but part of the gap probably stems from girls' ability to self-regulate from an earlier age. When they feel empathy, they're better able to resist hurtful impulses. "It's not so much that boys are less empathetic," says Walker, "but sometimes they're working on other issues, like self-control."

Another factor in the gender gap is girls' tendency to be more empathetic and less aggressive when interacting with other children. Boys, on the other hand, are often taught that they shouldn't show much emotion. "For some parents, anger is the only emotion they encourage their sons to express," says Walker.

But boys and girls both need to learn about all their emotions, she says. It's tough to form satisfying relationships, especially in marriage, if one partner doesn't understand emotions and hasn't learned to behave empathetically. "If they haven't been taught to deal with those things when they're younger, their later relationships will be more difficult," says Walker.

Label Feelings

One of the first steps in teaching children empathy is to help them learn about emotions in general. Young children feel all of the emotions that adults feel—from frustration to disappointment to sadness—but they lack experience identifying, labeling, and managing those feelings. When parents help children name what they feel, children can more easily make sense of their emotional world.

"You are your child's best emotional tutor," says Walker. "You have to help them understand what all these emotions are that they're feeling."

As you continue this coaching, over time your child will better understand important concepts, such as how his actions affect others. For example, if you are Jacob's dad, and you have helped him understand that what he felt when his sister took his toy from him was "sad," then later, when he takes a toy from his playmate, you can remind him: "Remember how sad you felt when Carolyn took

your toy? That's what Robbie is feeling now."

As children get older, coaching evolves from labeling emotions to helping children understand what to do with their feelings. Stephen F. Duncan (MS '85), a professor in the School of Family Life, remembers when he and his wife helped his oldest daughter, Linsey, learn empathy. Another girl in her first-grade class had been treating her unkindly. "One day Linsey came home very upset. This time the girl had taken her backpack and hidden it. It was a special backpack because Linsey and her mother had made it together. We knew this was an important time to teach Linsey empathy and kindness, but she also needed to have the meanness stop."

Duncan and his wife prayed for help and felt impressed to tell Linsey that her classmate probably was not very happy. They suggested that Linsey try giving her secret treats and notes to help her feel happier and maybe even more caring. After a week or so, the girl discovered that Linsey was the source of the gifts, and she changed. "The girl no longer was unkind to Linsey and even became a protector. Linsey learned that sometimes when other people behave badly, it's because they're hurting, and that often we can help them feel better."

Model Empathy

One of the most powerful ways to teach children empathy is to be empathetic yourself in your parenting. While having patience with small children can be difficult, it's important to stay as calm as you can when they misbehave. "If your child does something you don't like, it's not helpful to yell at them or hit them. That teaches them that yelling and hitting are acceptable ways to handle feelings. Then they might do those things to other children," says Walker.

As children get older, they can learn empathy from you as you express interest in their experiences and listen carefully as they talk, reflecting back to them what they say and asking them questions that help them clarify their feelings and thoughts. As their own empathy grows because of your modeling, they'll be more able to relate deeply to others. They also will grow in their ability to act on empathetic feelings by learning to provide a listening ear, help others, and show generosity.

Walker recently had a chance to practice modeling empathy for her 5-year-old son: "My son did something after I had asked him not to. Instead of yelling at him, I sincerely told him how I was feeling about the situation. A little later he said, 'Mom, how are you feeling? Are you still sad?' This interaction helped him to understand my feelings and his own, and it was also a good lesson in how his behavior makes others feel."

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