

Empathy Age 17 Summary

Why Empathy?

Your teen's ability to understand the experience of others and to make meaningful connections with people in their life is based on their capacity for empathy. Understanding what someone else is feeling requires your teen to identify and recognize their feelings. This takes practice. As a parent or those in a parenting role, you can nurture, model, and teach empathy skills for your teen.

Tip: These steps are best done when you and your teen are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

STEP
1



Get Your Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask your teen to make a plan for pausing in the heat of a big emotion. *"What could you do when you are upset to help you remember to stop and identify your feelings?"*
- Practice reading social cues. Each time there is an opportunity, ask your teen, *"How do you think your friend feels?"*
- Refer to a feelings chart as you learn different feelings' physical and facial expressions together.
- Ask about what it means to truly focus on a friend to understand and show empathy.
- Discuss noticing pain and what to do when you feel another's pain. When your teen shares stories of friends or peers they know experiencing pain, ask about it.
- Ask about your teen's feelings when they are viewing social media. Ask them how others feel when they get comments, judgments, or criticism.

Tip Because teens are curious about others, any social situations, news stories, or community problems are opportunities to raise reasonable questions about others' thoughts and feelings for important practice with the complexities of empathic thinking. Raise these conversations regularly to offer practice with various people and situations.

Tip It is important to withhold judgment when your teen expresses their feelings. You want to encourage that all feelings are valid, and empathy means believing how another person says they are feeling even if their feelings do not align with how you have felt during a similar experience. This can be challenging for parents or those in a parenting role when their teen may have a significant emotional reaction to something that seems small to an adult; validating their big feelings is the first step in helping them cope with their feelings and recognize the feelings of those around them.

**STEP
2**



Teach New Skills

- Set the rule in your household: **Having feelings is always okay!**
- Do daily feelings check-ins. Do not judge but care for each other when challenging feelings are expressed.
- Model healthy feelings identification and expression. If you experience a big emotion, giving yourself a moment to stop and truly identify your feelings is beneficial.
- Notice facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language in others that indicate feelings.
- Brainstorm ways to offer help or care for someone in pain or suffering.
- Encourage empathic thinking even when it's most challenging for your teen.
- Discuss the needs and challenges of the bigger world. Empathy and developing a sense of purpose in life require teens to have beyond-the-self interests.
- Create opportunities with your teen to experience diversity.
- Participate as a family in service. Consider what community issues you want to address and find ways to volunteer together.

Trap Don't tell your teen what they feel; ask instead. You want to empower teens with their chance to articulate what's in their hearts. Be sure to ask about a mix of emotions if you perceive them. You might say, *"You look sad and frustrated. Is that right?"*

Tip Remember communication is 90% body language and emotional signals and only 10% verbal. You can practice reading others' body language while watching a movie or people-watching at a busy airport or mall.

**STEP
3**



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Reflect on movie characters and lyrics. Discuss the characters' thoughts and feelings when reading books or listening to music with your teen.

- Offer empathic listening (reflecting feelings and thoughts) when your teen comes to you with a social problem. Resist fixing the problem or offering solutions but instead ask questions to prompt their thinking about how best to handle the situation and relationship.

Trap Resist judging other teens who hurt your teen with words or actions. Most often, you don't know the whole story of the one lashing out, but you do know one thing for sure – that individual is hurting. First, listen to the feelings of your teen and express care. Then, relay that it's impossible to know everything affecting the one lashing out. *"People tend to say hurtful words when they are also hurting. Do you know why they might be hurting?"* Prompt, compassionate thinking. Then, coach your teen on responding in ways that do not harm themselves or others. *"Next time, could you move away or ask them to stop? Good. Can you try it out?"*

**STEP
4**



SUPPORT

Support Your Teen's Development and Success

- Use "Tell me..." statements and ask them to demonstrate empathy. You could say, *"Tell me what you understand about how your sister feels."*
- Recognize effort using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw they needed a ride and offered to drop them off. That was kind of you."*

**STEP
5**



RECOGNIZE

Recognize Efforts

No matter how old your teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.

- There are many ways you can reinforce your teen's efforts. It is essential to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors have different impacts on your teen's behavior.
 - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You called and checked on your friend who was upset. You are a good friend!"* Recognition can include nonverbal recognition such as a smile, high five, or hug.
 - **Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined so the teen knows what to expect, like *"If you get to know your new teammates, we can have them over for pizza"* (if you XX, then I'll XX). The goal should be to help your teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a teen's intrinsic motivation.
 - Unlike a reward, **bribes** aren't planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role are in a crisis (like a teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering). To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for a snack on the way home if the teen stops arguing and leaves the event). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to

manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation or behavior change and should be avoided.

- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, if your teen includes a new classmate in hanging out with their friend group or finds a way to help a friend feel better, recognize their effort.

Trap Don't fix problems between your teen and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for them. Instead, ask them questions about how they can get their needs met (*"Could you take a break? Maybe sit somewhere else for lunch for a day or two?"*) and how they can understand each other's feelings and start to feel better.

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