

Empathy Age 9 Summary

Why Empathy?

Your child'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 that your child first identify and recognize their feelings. This takes practice.

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

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

STEP 1 **Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input**

- Ask your child to try to identify their feelings. *“What are you feeling right now? How does your body feel? Hot in the face? Sick in your tummy?”*
- Create a plan for your child to pause amid big feelings so that they can recognize and name those feelings. *“What could you do when you are upset to help you remember to stop and name your feelings?”*
- Ask your child questions about their feelings, then shift questions to how they perceive others might be feeling. *“How do you think the other child feels? What is telling you that?”*

Tip Because children are curious about others, any social situations, news stories, or community problems can be opportunities to raise reasonable questions about others' thoughts and feelings for important practice with the complexities of empathic thinking.

Tip It is important to withhold judgment when your child 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 child may have a big emotional reaction to something that seems small to an adult. Validating their big feelings is the first step in learning to help them cope with their feelings and recognize the feelings of those around them. For example, it isn't helpful to say, *"That isn't something to be upset about."* or *"Why are you crying?"* Instead, say, *"It sounds like you're really sad. Let's practice taking deep breaths together and see if you feel ready to discuss it."*



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 healthy.
- Notice facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language in others that indicate their feelings.
- Practice reading others' body language while watching a movie together.
- Brainstorm ways to offer help or care for someone in pain or distress.
- Encourage empathetic thinking even when it's most challenging for your child.
- Practice and support inclusion.
- Post your feelings chart somewhere visible as a reminder.

Trap Don't tell your child what they feel; ask instead. Empower children with their own feelings vocabulary. You might say, *"You look sad. 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.



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Respectfully mirror your child's facial expressions, tones of speech, and attitudes when communicating with them, and encourage them to mirror what they see in you back to you. Mirroring means you pay attention to and understand each other's thoughts and feelings.

- Discuss characters' motivation for choices and their feelings when conflicts or problems occur in stories when you read together.
- Practice empathy skills when your child comes home with a story about friends or peers at school. *“What do you think they were feeling? Thinking? And what could make things better?”*
- Play family guessing games like “Guess the emotion I am making with my face.” Take turns making different emotional faces and guessing the feeling being portrayed.

Trap Resist judging other children who hurt your child with words or actions. Most often, you may not know the whole story of the child lashing out, but you do know one thing for sure – that child is hurting. First, listen to the feelings of your child and express care. Then, tell that it's impossible to see the whole picture. *“Children tend to say hurtful words when they are also hurting. Do you know why they might be hurting?”* Prompt, compassionate thinking. Then, coach your child on responding in ways that do not harm themselves or others. *“Next time, could you move away or ask them to stop? Good. Let's practice.”*



Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Use “Tell me...” statements to support their skills: *“Tell me what you understand about how your sister feels. What is something you can do for her to show you understand and are here for her?”*
- Recognize effort using “I notice” statements like: *“I noticed how you saw they were sad and shared your favorite snack to help them feel better. That was kind of you.”*
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. *“How have you been feeling during recess?”*



Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your child is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a big impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your child's efforts. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors have different impacts on your child's behavior.
 - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *“You invited that child sitting quietly alone at lunch to join your table. I love hearing that!”* 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 ahead of time so that the child knows what to expect, like *“If you share your new game with your sister, you will get 10 minutes of extra time to play”* (if you XX, then I'll XX). The goal should be to help your child progress to a time when the reward will no

longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a child'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 is in the middle of a crisis (like in the grocery store checkout line and your children are arguing. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to buy a sucker if the children will stop the arguing). 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 child talks to a new classmate, offer a playdate or an after-school snack. If your child helps a friend feel better, recognize their effort.

Trap Don't fix problems between your child and another child. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child. Instead, ask them questions about how they can get their needs met ("Could you take a break, get a drink of water, and then go back to playing?") and how they can understand each other's feelings and start to feel better.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2023). *Empathy Age 9 Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ToolsforYourChildsSuccess.org>

This content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Tools for Your Child's Success communities, financial supporters, contributors, SAMHSA or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

© 2023 Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University