

Empathy Age 4 Summary

Why Empathy?

Your child's secure and trusting connection with you is pivotal to their emerging empathy for others. You can support their growing empathy as you interact and share love and conversation.

Tip: Be sure you talk about anger at a calm time when you are not stressed or upset!

Tip: Intentional communication and healthy parenting relationships will support these steps.

STEP

1



GET INPUT

Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, *“How do you feel? How do you think the other child feels?”*
 - For example, if your child is with others expressing emotion, help your child notice cues from other children's faces and body language. For example, *“Her face is frowning. Do you think she's feeling sad?”*
- When reading books, look at the images of children or animals and guess the feelings by asking, *“What do you think that character is thinking?”* and *“What do you think that character is feeling?”*
- If your child is unsure about how others are feeling or is buried in their feelings, ask questions to help them. You could say,
 - *“What do you notice the other child is feeling?”*
 - *“How do you know from their facial expression?”*
 - *“What does their voice sound like? How are they moving?”*
- Practicing naming feelings will enable your child to identify their feelings and others and seek support when needed.

STEP

2



TEACH

Teach New Skills

- Model empathy while interacting with your child. Modeling empathy can be one of the greatest teaching tools.

- Share the focus. As you spend time with your child, follow their lead. As they pick up new toys or explore a different part of the room, notice and name what they are exploring.
- Notice gestures and listen for thoughts and feelings. Attempt to figure out what your child is trying to tell you. Name it when they express a feeling on their face or through their body. *“I noticed your face is red, and you are frowning. You look angry. Is that right?”*
- Children require your attention to thrive. Try to build a special time into your routine when you are fully present to listen to what your child has to tell you. Turn off your phone. Set a timer if needed. Then, notice your body language. Ask yourself, “What is my body communicating, and how am I demonstrating that I’m listening?”
- Read and “pretend play” together.
 - Use reading time, for example, and select a book of faces to help your child identify the different feelings of other children. Point out how you can tell each child's feelings and practice recreating those cues with your child.
 - After reading a story together, act out the plot and use feeling words and expressions to match how the characters feel throughout the story. This will help them expand their feeling vocabulary and learn to recognize a wide range of perspectives and feelings they might not encounter in daily interactions with others.
- Make your thinking and feelings explicit. Talk about how you feel, why, and what signs you give, even when uncomfortable. *“I am sad because I just dropped my special cup, which broke. Can you tell? My face is frowning.”*
- Talk aloud about how you respond to your big feelings. *“I’m going to take a few deep breaths before trying again. That will help me.”*
- Develop empathetic thinking. For example, when your child points a blaming finger, saying *“He did it!”* you may respond with:
 - *“What do you think he’s feeling?”*
 - *“What choice would you make if you were sad or hurt?”*
 - *“What do you think could make him feel better?”*

Trap: Don’t tell your child what they feel; ask instead. Three—to four-year-olds strive for independence and may push back if you are too direct about their thoughts and feelings. You might say, “You look sad. Is that right?”

STEP
3



PRACTICE

Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Set the rule or expectation in your household: Having feelings is always okay! This will help each family member feel safe expressing what they are feeling. What you do with those feelings is the important next step in determining whether you take responsibility for your emotions and actions so that you do not harm yourself or others.

- Whenever you see another child become emotional, use it as an opportunity to figure out the feeling together. *“What do you think he’s feeling now? Why do you think that?”*
- Read together. When you read stories together, you engage in an activity that can be deeply connecting for both of you. Be sure to involve your child in selecting the book they want to read. Involve your child in holding the book, turning pages, and predicting what will come next. Hold onto a page before turning it and ask, *“What do you think will happen next?”* Reflect on the story, and you’ll take the learning opportunity one step further. *“Do you think the character was sad that he spilled his milk?”*
- Play games to practice feelings. Playing games like *Going on a Bear Hunt* allows you and your child to try on different feelings and practice the facial expressions, tone of voice, and movements that might match those feelings. For example, when you are running from the bear, you feel scared and move fast. You might have your eyes widened, and you might even be screaming. Learning those feelings when having fun allows for your full attention rather than being distracted by your heightened feelings.
- Involve the whole family and create guessing games at dinner or when you are playing together. Have Daddy make an emotional face. Take turns guessing what Daddy is feeling. Remember that your child actively tries to determine other people’s feelings and reactions. Join in the excitement of discovering other’s thoughts and feelings, and your child will remain curious and learn even when you are not present.
- Initially, the practice may require more teaching. However, only take over and tell your child what others are thinking and feeling while allowing them the practice of guessing.

Trap: Avoid 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, express 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 how to respond in ways that do not harm self or another. *“Next time, could you move away or ask them to stop? Good. Let’s practice.”*

STEP
4



Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- Initially, your child may need active support to encourage empathy. Use *“Show me…”* statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. And ask them to demonstrate empathy. For example, you could say, *“Show me how you can help your friend who is crying.”*
- Recognize effort using *“I notice”* statements like: *“I noticed how you saw she was sad and gave her one of your toys to help her feel better. That was kind of you.”*
- On days with extra challenges, when you can see your child is frustrated or feeling incapable, proactively remind your child of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child’s ear, *“Remember how you hugged your sister to feel*

better the other day? How could you do the same for your brother, who is having a hard day today?"

- Actively reflect on how your child feels when approaching challenges. You can ask questions like:
 - *"How are you feeling at playtime?"* Offering a chance to talk gives insight into your child's social challenges.
 - *"It seems like you got frustrated with your turn-taking and stopped playing. Is that right? Did it help you feel better?"* Be sure to reflect on the outcomes of their choices.

Trap: Don't fix problems between your child and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child. Instead, ask them questions about how they can meet their own needs (*"Could you hug a teddy bear and then go back to playing?"*) and how they can understand each other's feelings and start to feel better.

STEP 5  **RECOGNIZE** **Recognize Efforts**

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after completing your bedtime routine, snuggle and read before bed.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

Trap: Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

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