



Developing Empathy in the Classroom

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Empathy is the ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them. It is part of a strong positive emotional state in which we can treat others with respect while still setting appropriate limits on how others behave around us. Empathy is the heart of a great classroom culture.

Empathy does not offer excuses for bad choices. As a teacher, sometimes empathy must be followed by a consequence, or by allowing some sadness to come into the lives of our students. But with empathy, we can give consequences with love rather than anger. Empathy is the foundation of all emotional intelligence. By helping children learn empathy, we raise the odds they will have strong positive social relationships, truly care for others, and be able to set appropriate limits in their own lives without using angry behaviors or words.

In many schools the curriculum-driven model has made it difficult to find time to help children develop the skills associated with empathy and social-emotional intelligence. It is ironic. In an effort to achieve better test scores on state assessments, schools have cut time for developing positive classroom behavior routines, building strong positive relationships, and for class activities which help students feel connected to the teacher and to each other. The irony is that programs that build safety, connection, empathy, and positive social skills invariably lead to a classroom environment in which students both learn more and produce better test scores.

Here are some tips for developing an empathetic classroom:

1. Start by building a classroom culture in which students feel safe and secure. Students who are afraid of physical or emotional harm give attention to their own well-being, and have less ability to notice the well-being of others.
2. Classroom procedures and routines build a sense of predictable security for children. Well established routines also help students practice self-regulation skills as they learn how to wait

calmly, recognize the behaviors that lead to positive outcomes in the classroom, and follow the steps to success.

3. Help students develop listening and observation skills by planning morning meetings, having discussions about what is going well and what needs to improve in our classroom, and teaching specific observation skills and listening which some children have not learned in the home.

4. Self-regulation skills are the foundation for empathy. By learning to calm themselves, regulate emotions, delay gratification, persevere, and stay focused on the right things, students develop the skills which allow them to look beyond themselves. Don't take self-regulation skills for granted. Find ways to purposefully help children develop these skills within the classroom.

5. Consider developing a clear set of expectations for how adults will treat students and how students will treat each other within the classroom. Making a commitment to treating each other with respect, and then learning to stand up and speak up for yourself and for others helps build a powerful sense of community (*The Juice Box Bully*, Bob Sornson, 2011).

6. Use great literature and tell great stories to inspire students to understand the experience of others (*Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning about Empathy*, Sornson, 2013).

7. Model empathy. Your students are watching!

8. Relationships matter. Empathy is the ability to understand how someone feels, but caring about others precedes giving effort to noticing the experience and feelings of others. Help kids build relationships which inspire them to trust and care for others.



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