

Empathy Age 14 Summary

Why Empathy?

Your child's/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 child/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 the skills of empathy for your child/teen.

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

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

STEP
1



Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask your child/teen to identify their feelings. *"What are you feeling right now? How does your body feel? Hot in the face? Sick in your stomach?"*
- Ask your child/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 name your feeling?"*
- 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 the characters' thoughts and feelings when reading books or watching movies with your child/teen.
- Ask about your child's/teen's feelings when viewing social media. Ask them how others feel when they get comments, judgments, or criticism.

Tip Because children/teens 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/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 child/teen 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."*

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 healthy.
- 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 distress.
- Encourage empathic thinking even when it's most challenging for your child/teen.
- Practice and support inclusion.
- Post your feelings chart somewhere visible as a reminder.

Trap Don't tell your child/teen what they feel; ask instead. Empower them 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.

STEP
3



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Discuss characters' motivation for choices and their feelings when conflicts or problems occur in stories when you read or watch a movie together.
- Practice empathy skills when your child/teen 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? What were you thinking and feeling when that happened? Is there any harm that needs to be repaired between you and another peer?"

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

STEP
4



Support Your Child's/Teen's Development and Success

- Use "Tell me..." statements to support their skills: *"Tell me what you understand about how your sister is feeling."*
- 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/teen is feeling when approaching challenges. *"How did things go during lunch? How have you been feeling?"*

STEP
5



Recognize Efforts

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

- You can reinforce your child's/teen's efforts in many ways. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three parenting behaviors impact your child's/teen's behavior differently.
 - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You invited that new student sitting alone at lunch to join your table. I love hearing that!"* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment 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/teen 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/teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. Rewards can decrease a child's/teen's intrinsic motivation if used too often.
 - 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 child/teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering). To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for ice cream on the way home if the

child/teen will stop arguing and leave 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 child/teen talks to a new classmate, offer a time to hang out or invite the new student to a school function. If your child/teen finds a way to help a friend feel better, recognize their effort.

Trap Don't fix problems between your child/teen and another. You could be taking away valuable learning for your child/teen. 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.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2023). *Empathy Age 14 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