

Empathy Age 2 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.



Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Each time there is an opportunity, share how you are feeling and ask your child how they feel: *"I am getting hungry; are you feeling hungry?"* Two-year-olds do not yet have a feelings vocabulary and cannot describe their body sensations when upset or dealing with big feelings. They will need your support to be successful.
 - For example, if your child makes a disagreeable facial expression, notice and name the feeling. *"I noticed that when I told you to share your toy with your friend, your eyebrows squished down, and there was a line in your forehead. Were you feeling mad?"*
- Practicing naming feelings will enable your child to identify their feelings and others and seek support when needed. This can help reduce the length and strength of tantrums as your child gains skills in understanding their feelings.
- When reading books, point out feelings. Talk about what you notice. *"I noticed the duck in this story felt sad when he couldn't have another cookie" or "When the little bear shared his toy with his friend, he looked happy. He had a smile on his face."*



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. It may feel unnatural initially but pretend you are the narrator of their play. For example, “I see you grabbed the red block. Now you are stacking it. You’ve got another block. The tower is getting higher!” Your verbal observation will allow your child to feel seen and heard and develop their verbal skills.

- 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 you are smiling. You look happy.”*
- 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 and select a book of faces to help your child learn to 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 expands their feelings vocabulary and teaches them how 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 you feel it, and what signs you are giving, particularly when it’s uncomfortable. *“I am frustrated because I cannot get the seat belt to work. Can you tell? My face is red and getting hot.”*
- Talk aloud about how you respond to your big feelings: *“I’m going to take a few deep breaths before trying again and see if that helps.”*
- Each time there is an opportunity, share how others may be feeling with your child. For example, if your child is with others expressing feelings, help your child notice cues from other children’s faces and body language. For example, *“Her face is frowning. I think she may be feeling sad?”*



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Allow your child to interact with new people of all ages with you close by.
- Create a consistent routine with regular nap times, play times, and meals. Routines create a sense of safety and security so your child can focus on learning and growing.
- Narrate your day as you do your household chores or run errands in your community. This narration will offer your child a sense of connection and provide practice in some of the building blocks of empathy, such as listening to your thoughts and feelings.

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

Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Initially, your child may need active support. Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. And ask them to demonstrate how they can work hard toward a goal. When children learn a new skill, they are eager to show it off! *"Show me how you can help your sister when she feels sad."*
- Recognize effort using "I notice" statements like: *"I noticed how you saw she was sad and gave her a toy to help her feel better. That was kind of you."*
- When you see your child frustrated or incapable, proactively remind them of their strength. In a gentle, non-public way, whisper in your child's ear, *"Remember how you enjoyed playing at the park with your new friend yesterday? You might enjoy doing it again today. I will stand beside you."*
- Actively reflect on how your child feels when approaching challenges. *"It seems like you got mad about taking turns sharing the toy. You just 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 good questions about how they can get their needs met ("Could you hug a teddy bear and then go back to playing?") and how they can understand and support each other's feelings and start feeling 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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