

Relationships matter.  
Help children build  
relationships which  
inspire them to trust  
and care for others.

# Feelings matter

*One of the things that has shocked adults about the 'Roastbuster' coverage last year is the seeming insensitivity shown by posting and sharing details of traumatic events on Facebook and through Twitter, not just by the perpetrators, but by their friends and peers. Bullying and insensitivity using digital media has risen and indicates a worrying lack of respect for the victim and also for each other. So, when do children learn how to value the feelings of another person?*

Understanding and showing empathy is the result of many social-emotional skills that develop in the very first years of life. One of the most important milestones is establishing a secure, strong and loving relationship with you as parents. Feeling accepted and understood by you helps your child to develop a firm foundation so they can learn how to accept and understand others as they grow.

At around six months, babies begin to use social referencing. This is when a baby will look to a parent or other loved one to gauge his or her reaction to a person or situation. For

example, a seven-month-old will use social referencing when new people arrive, or new people approach them – especially if you try to leave them with others or in a new situation. The parent's response influences how the baby responds – tone of voice, facial expression, body language, touch. This is why parents are encouraged to be positive and reassuring – not anxiously hovering – when saying goodbye at preschool or kindy. It sends the message that 'this is a safe place', these people are great to be with, and 'you will be okay.' Social referencing, or being sensitive to a caregiver's reaction in new situations, helps babies understand the world around them. For many years to come, children will use social referencing to assess whether a situation or person is safe, whether they need to be worried, and, if so, how much.

When a child is between 18 and 24 months, they develop a theory of mind. This is when toddlers first realise that, just as they have their own thoughts, feelings and goals, others have their own thoughts and ideas, which may be different from theirs. At around the same time, they learn to recognise themselves in a mirror. This shows that your child has a firm understanding of themselves as a separate and unique person.

*Continued overleaf...*





## What is empathy?

Empathy is the ability to imagine how someone else is feeling in a particular situation and respond with care. This is a very complex skill to develop. Being able to empathise with another person means a child:

- Understands they are a separate individual.
- Understands others can have different thoughts and feelings to them.
- Recognises common feelings that most people experience – happiness, surprise, anger, disappointment, sadness, etc
- Is able to look at a particular situation (such as seeing another child cry when being excluded from a game) and imagine how they and therefore their friend, might feel. An example of smaller children is seeing their friend have an accident (eg, falling over, having a cut or bruise, or generally just crying, the reason does not need to be apparent to the very young ones). 1-3-year-olds will respond as they have learnt themselves, eg, stroke on the cheek, kiss, cuddle, bring their friend something special like a blanky.
- Can imagine what response might be appropriate or comforting in that particular situation, such as giving a kiss, bringing them something special or giving them a comforting hug.

## Ways to cultivate empathy in children

Start with safety and security. Fear interferes with the development of empathy so learn to set limits at home with respect and love.

Regular routines build a sense of predictable security for children and also help them practice self-regulation skills – these skills are the foundation for empathy. By learning to calm themselves, regulate emotions, delay gratification, persevere, and stay focused, children develop the skills which allow them to look beyond themselves.

Tell stories that help children see the world from the perspective of others. Read great children's books with your kids, a well-crafted story draws children into the lives of the characters and helps them learn to see the world differently.

Notice your children's feelings, describe them, and empathise with them. Talk about these feelings and help children learn to use words to describe their inner experiences. Show your child that it is ok to show a range of feelings towards you, including anger. Speak about it and acknowledge these difficult emotions.

It is important to model empathy yourself. Notice the lives of others, talk about your experiences practicing empathy, and be honest about the times you forgot to act with empathy. Explore with your children how they can show empathy and practice with them. Involve them in being empathic towards others in practical ways, e.g. "let's take this cake over to Mrs Neighbour because she has just come home from hospital"; or "let's get Little Jonny an ice pack to make his knee better, he bruised it so hard".

## Learn to say sorry

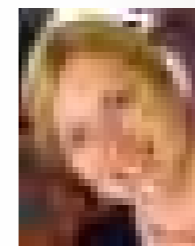
Adults need to be patient. Empathy takes time to develop and it cannot be forced; e.g., "you have to say sorry to Jonny now because you pushed him over; unless you say sorry to Jonny you will not get your toy back" etc. Little kids do not understand what that means and why they have to say precisely that. If we force it, then the "I am sorry" becomes meaningless, not sincere, in addition, they then also dislike the parent for making them say it.

To help children learn how to take responsibility for their undesirable actions and learn empathy, help

them identify the other child's feelings, connect the feelings and reaction to their action, and then most importantly help them take responsibility in practical ways. "Now look Jonny, little Miss Muffet is rubbing her knee and she is crying because she hurt her arm when you pushed her over. Let's ask her if she is ok and what we can do for her to make her feel better." Saying sorry is often also not what the child who's been hurt, wants, as that won't necessarily make them feel better; they might just want the perpetrator's favourite toy for five minutes to make up!

Have realistic expectations of your child's developmental ability. You can't expect a three-year-old to be sorry straight away and make their friend feel better for pushing them over, although the friend took their most favourite toy; it doesn't matter that they weren't playing with it at the time.... In their eyes it is still their most favourite toy that is not to be touched at ANY TIME BY ANYONE ANYWHERE. Moral development goes through stages and we need to be realistic in our expectations if we want to nurture our children accordingly. But that's another topic, for another issue. ■

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