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## Working with Families to Support Children's Empathy

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### INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the article “The Importance of Showing Empathy to Kids Who Learn and Think Differently.” The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

### Goals

- ◆ Think about classroom scenarios and learn to tell the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- ◆ Learn how to work with families together to nurture their children’s empathy.
- ◆ Recognize how your own empathetic responses support your work with families and children.

### Activity

- ◆ Read the article.
- ◆ Use the reflection questions to explore what empathy means. Create a plan on how to work with families to foster their children’s empathy.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support children’s empathy.

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**Empathy isn’t about feeling sorry, but it is about feelings.**

**Amanda Morin**

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the difference between empathy and sympathy? Read the scenarios below. Think about whether the described response is empathetic or sympathetic.
  - Ms. Santos appeared somewhat distressed as she dropped off Maria one morning. The teacher noticed Ms. Santos and approached gently asking, “Is everything ok? I can see you seem somewhat upset. Would you like to talk about it?”
  - Mark was visibly limping as he picked up his little brother. Noticing his difficult movement, a teacher says, “Your leg looks like it’s really bothering you. I’m sorry it’s hurting. Feel better!”
  - Mr. Tao commented to his daughter’s teacher how frustrated he was with the learning center’s limited lunch options. The teacher listened until he was done and replied, “Thank you for sharing that with me. It is very important for us to make sure families feel that the food we serve is respectful of cultural and religious practices. When would be a good time for us to talk more about this and include the center director?”
- ◆ What helped you to decide whether a response was empathetic or sympathetic? Why do you think understanding the difference matters? How may it affect your interactions and support for children?

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- ◆ The article outlines four main elements of empathy:
    - Perspective taking
    - Setting aside judgment
    - Understanding the child’s feelings
    - Communicating your understanding
  - ◆ Think about a past interaction (or a possible future conversation) with a family that was difficult.
    - Write it down and share with a partner (or reflect on your own).
    - Use the four elements to outline what an empathetic response from you would look like.
      - How would you approach each step?
      - Which step might be easier? Which might be harder? Why?
      - How would you change your response if there was a language barrier with the family?

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- ◆ While empathy does not typically emerge until toddlerhood, young children may benefit from early exposure to the elements of empathy at school and home. Plan to connect with families around supporting their child’s development of empathy. For example, consider:
    - **Sharing this article.** How can you engage families in sharing their empathetic responses to their children’s strong emotions? What works for them? What doesn’t?
    - **Sharing books.** Suggest books that feature characters showing emotions. Encourage families talk about or mimic (with younger children) what the characters are feeling and what could make them feel better.
    - **Opportunities for helping others.** Talk to families about ways young children help others and show care at home or in their community. Listen to their ideas for how you can connect that to the classroom.
    - **School-home connection.** Share with families the ways you support empathy at school. This can be through photographs, children’s drawings, your care notes, etc.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about working with families to support children's empathy:

- ◆ **Source:** Sesame Street in Communities
- ◆ **Video:** Empathy
- ◆ **Link:** <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/activities/empathy/>
- ◆ **Description:** This video shows the puppet Murray having some trouble understanding what empathy means. Teachers and families can use this resource to help children get clarity on this emotion.

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- ◆ **Source:** Edutopia
  - ◆ **Blog:** Building Empathetic Relationships with the Parents of Your Most Challenging Student
  - ◆ **Link:** <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/building-empathetic-relationships-parents-your-most-challenging-student>
  - ◆ **Description:** This blog looks at how teachers can engage empathetically with families. Teachers can model empathy by understanding a family's background and experiences. This will strengthen their relationship with the families and will help children learn from example what it means to show empathy.

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- ◆ **Source:** Medium
  - ◆ **Article:** Learning the Languages of Our Students — An Exercise in Empathy
  - ◆ **Link:** <https://medium.com/@lingodeer/learning-the-languages-of-our-students-an-exercise-in-empathy-ee83e8866fb2>
  - ◆ **Description:** This article talks about the importance for teachers to understand the task of learning a new language. This challenging experience is one faced by many families in early childhood classrooms. Through this exercise, teachers may learn to be more empathetic to dual language learner students and their families.