

Three Ways to Develop Empathy in Children and Students

by Justin Coulson | @justincoulson | January 5, 2016 9:21 am

There is a significant push to eradicate bullying, domestic violence, disrespect, and unkindness in our schools, communities, and families. This is to be applauded.

Frustratingly, we are often going about our efforts in ways that all-too-often entrench a power-centric, bullying culture. We treat children who act unkindly with more unkindness. We treat children who behave disrespectfully with an additional dose of disrespect. We bully bullies.

Making Other People Real

I recently came across a quote that struck me for both its depth and simplicity. It said, “To the immature, other people are not real.”

When we are immature, we treat other people as if they are not especially real. Their feelings and desires do not matter to us as much as the feelings and desires of the person they were unkind or disrespectful towards. We fail to see the world through their eyes, to understand how it is for them, and to connect with them where they are. To the extent that other people are not real to us we are guarded, aggressive, or aloof. We get wrapped up in ourselves. We want everyone to hurry up and do as we say. Others become an obstacle in our way, a step up on our climb to the top, or simply irrelevant.

To the contrary, when we are mature, we see people as real. This means that we see bullying as a cry for help, disrespect as an opportunity to connect, and unkindness as something to be met with compassion and help. We open ourselves up to the inner reality of others and make their needs and aspirations as important as our own.

In short, we develop empathy—or a desire to see and feel as the other person sees and feels—in our hearts. And we encourage it in the children we are raising or teaching.

What can we do to promote greater empathy in children?

First, we can model it ourselves.

The truth is that we tend to view ourselves as the center of the universe; even the more selfless among us. We do not model empathy particularly well, especially when we are under pressure and are not being mindful (which seems to be much of the time). Consider this: what do our children or students see in our behavior when we are inconvenienced? When we are spoken to badly by a student, or when we experience poor quality service in a store, or when our students fail to follow instructions?

Most of us will acknowledge that we often respond with anger, annoyance, and judgement. As the center of the universe we feel frustration at being put out, ignored or undermined. We lack empathy for the other person.

But we can choose maturity. We can choose to see the other person as real. In the case of a disrespectful student we might pause and comment “Wow, you seem to be having a tough day. Are you OK?” This is an important lesson for our children.

When the store assistant gives us poor service and a sour face, we might politely think aloud to our child, “Gee, I wonder what has happened to him today to make him so grumpy? Perhaps the boss got mad at him, or a customer was rude and made him feel bad?”

When a student fails to follow instructions, we can consider, “Is this student hungry, angry, lonely, tired, stressed, or sick? Did they hear me? Are they still thinking about what I asked?”

When we see other people as real, we are open to considering alternative views of their circumstances and we alter our responses towards them. We become more compassionate, kind, and understanding. We become more balanced, considered, and mindful. We become happier. Our relationships improve. These responses teach our children and students that we see them as real people and understand how life may be for them. We can teach that humility and humanity, rather than anger, is the best way to respond to challenging interpersonal situations.

Second, we can encourage perspective-taking by asking them what they perceive in others.

With young children, we might read a book and pause, asking how each character is feeling in a particular scenario. “We know that the girl is excited. But how about her brother? How does this make him feel?”

In a class situation we could assign students to write a story from another person’s perspective. In a disciplinary situation, rather than punishing we might invite an aggressor to walk us through the feelings the victim of their poor behavior may have had before, during, and following their unkindness. We can help them understand life for the person. We might ask them to place themselves in their shoes as they walk home after school to describe to their parents what happened during their day. They can consider what that family might discuss regarding them (the aggressor) that night. By asking wise questions, we help the victim become a real person to the aggressor.

Third, we can help them to be sensitive to the cues others send.

We can do this by helping them identify body language, tone of voice, or facial expressions of others. “I know you’re excited about playing that game with your friend, but what did you notice about his face when you suggested it?” “We know that sport or activity x is your favorite, but do you recall how nobody else wanted to participate last time? What might playing that again with them lead to?”

It is hard to be violent and disrespectful when you have empathy.

One of the many factors that contributes to domestic violence, bullying, disrespect, or everyday unkindness is that offenders are unwilling to see the world through the eyes of another. The other person is not real to them. They lack the maturity to show empathy. In short, because other people are not real, other people’s feelings do not matter. In fact, other people don’t have feelings.

When we teach our children and students (by example and precept) to see others as real people, with real feelings, hopes, dreams, and desires, and with the same human frailties we all possess, we teach them to see others as humans whose lives are every bit as precious as their own. We teach them to value and respect others. We teach them to treat others the way others would like to be treated.

While not a silver bullet, our ability to be empathic towards our children and students, and to teach them to be empathic towards others, is a critical life skill that builds emotional intelligence, strengthens positive relationships, and creates within them a desire to help rather than hurt.

Dr. Justin Coulson is a parenting researcher, speaker, and author of the forthcoming 21 Days to a Happier Family[1]. Find him at happyfamilies.com.au[2] or on Twitter @justincoulson. This article originally appeared at www.justincoulson.com[3].

Endnotes:

1. 21 Days to a Happier Family: http://www.booktopia.com.au/21-days-to-a-happier-family-justin-coulson/prod9780733334818.html;jsessionid=V0suyoZ+ZF1vmo6G3PzJKGtv.undefind?clickid=38pQVn1Z6xRz0DhUjEUuTUoGUkSx11wxP2ymVw0&utm_campaign=HarperCollins+Publishers+Australia+Pty+Ltd&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_source=API
2. happyfamilies.com.au: <http://happyfamilies.com.au>
3. www.justincoulson.com: <http://www.justincoulson.com/>

Source URL: <http://family-studies.org/three-ways-to-develop-empathy-in-children-and-students/>

Copyright ©2016 **Family Studies** unless otherwise noted.