

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning at Home

This Week's Focus – Social-Awareness

What is Social-Awareness?

Before we can get along with each other or work together towards a common goal, we must get to know, understand, and respect each other. A key skill related to social-awareness is empathy – the ability to understand and appreciate the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of another person. Rather than ignoring or rejecting someone we disagree with, empathy helps us understand the other person, even if we don't agree. That understanding is essential to not only avoiding conflict, but also working together to achieve a common goal. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "I don't like that person. I have to get to know him better." Let's see how we can help our children and ourselves *grow our empathy*.

Strategy – "Grow Your Empathy"

The goal of this strategy is simple – to help our children develop their ability to show empathy.

For elementary students – The foundation of empathy is the ability to recognize another person's emotions – to understand and appreciate what the other person is feeling. A great way to develop this skill with young children is to read books together and discuss how the characters in the story are feeling. Ask your child questions like, "how do you think the character is feeling?," "Why do you think they feel that way?," and "do you think you would feel that way too?." You can also encourage them to write short stories about people they know, focusing on how they felt in each situation. Make sure they focus on positive emotions and not just negative ones.

For middle school students – Another key aspect of *growing your empathy* is learning how to listen to others. "Active Listening" refers to a set of skills to help us pay attention and understand what someone else is saying. Active listening skills are especially important with difficult or hard conversations. With our teenagers spending so much time communicating via social media, it can be hard for them to learn and practice active listening. The National Education Association provides a good overview of active listening skills and their importance at:

<http://www.nea.org/tools/build-better-listening-skills.html>. Review these pointers with your child and help them practice these important skills.

For high school students – One of the most important benefits of a well-developed empathy is that it can help us overcome biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. By enabling us to appreciate the experiences and feelings of others, empathy can help us better understand others and ourselves. Encourage your high schooler to read books or watch movies that present the life experiences of people different from themselves. Use your active listening skills to talk to your adolescent about their reactions and thoughts. Here is list of recommended books and movies

(<https://bit.ly/SABookRecs>).



For Preschool students – Observation is a key feature of empathy. Parents can help preschool children see the connections between actions and feelings by talking to children and encouraging them to observe what is happening all around them. For example, when you see a character on a T.V show or in a book that you are reading showing kindness, ask your child what they see. If they aren't sure, you can vocalize what you see. "The little boy is smiling because his friend just asked him to play." You should do the same with unkind behaviors so that your child starts to make the connections between actions and feelings. These observations and connections can happen during the most ordinary moments of every day whether it be while watching T.V, reading books, or in your daily interactions with family, friends, and neighbors.

For Infants and Toddlers – The most important thing that you can do as a parent is to show your baby how much you care about, understand, and respond to their feelings. When babies grow up with parents who are in synch and respond in loving ways to all of their feelings including happiness, sadness, hunger, and excitement, this lays the healthy foundation required for them to show empathy when they are old enough to do so. It is never too early to talk to your infant about feelings that they are experiencing and showing your compassion and empathy towards them.

A Note to Parents

Too often the evening news highlights stories of anger, conflict, and division. When appropriate, use these as an opportunity to highlight the importance of empathy by asking your child questions like, "do you think they are really listening to each other?," or "do you think he understands how the other person is feeling?". Real life examples can teach real life skills.

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning at Home is brought to you by Aperture Education (www.Apertureed.com) and The Devereux Center for Resilient Children (www.CenterforResilientChildren.org). Feel free to visit our websites for additional ideas.

Next Week's topic – Relationship Skills