

nurturing empathy

You put apples in their lunch boxes, you keep the pediatrician on speed dial. But as a mom, you want to nurture your kids' hearts, too.

To a great extent, the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes comes naturally. Children as young as 18 months exhibit signs of caring for others. How can parents support this trait?

We put the question to social media, opening up a Facebook chat with Dr. Ansley Tullos Gilpin, a child developmental psychologist and researcher at the University of Alabama—and a mom herself.

Q My younger daughter is extremely empathetic, while our older daughter is, by nature, much less so. Are there ways we can foster this in our older child?

—Lori, Roswell, Georgia

A Empathy requires us to experience someone else's emotional situation. Sympathy, however, is more cognitive than emotional, so regardless of children's emotional capacity, they can learn sympathetic prosocial behaviors.

Model sympathetic behavior, such as taking a meal to a sick neighbor. You can also use direct instruction to teach prosocial behavior. For example: "Our neighbor has the flu. Our family likes to help people, so we're going to make her a meal." By using direct instruction, modeling and talking about prosocial behaviors, you will teach your children that sympathy is important.

Q Recently I took my 4-year-old to a big birthday party at a playroom facility. The mood was hyper and crazed. I saw plenty of bad behavior—and my son joined right in. Next time, how can I prepare him (or myself)?

—Joanna, Nashville, Tennessee

A Party venues can be headaches for adults. However, playing with peers and engaging in conflict is an important part of learning how to be social beings. Kids learn social skills from peers that they can't learn from anyone else. They need to experience conflict, challenge and loss so they know how to respond to it when they're older. A big part of the benefit comes from learning how to resolve conflict.

If that can't happen at the party, role-play problem-solving later. "I saw you push John off the slide so you could go ahead of him. Was that nice? What should you do to make it right?" Then let him come up with solutions. Unless these parties are outright dangerous, they can be fun and good learning experiences.

Children as young as 18 months show the ability to experience the emotions of others.

Q I want my 3½-year-old to resist engaging in "mean girl" behavior. I notice kids excluding others and saying things like, "I'm not going to be your friend unless..." What should I say?

—Holly, Brandon, Florida

A Good idea to start early! Preschoolers are developing skills that help them be good social partners throughout their lifetime. For example, right now she should be learning to take another person's perspective, which is a really hard skill for children to learn. Believe it or not, it's news to little ones that what they've said has made their friend unhappy.

To help kids understand perspective, ask them, "How would it make you feel if Susie said that to you?" Preschoolers are also mastering emotional and behavioral control, so calmly explain, "When we're mad we say, 'I'm mad,' but we don't say mean things to our friends." Be patient: They're still developing attention, memory, and inhibition skills. They need us to model good behavior, and they need lots of practice doing it themselves. •

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