

# Empathy Paves the Way to Children's Friendship Skills



by Karen Stephens

Children's capacity to be empathetic and compassionate with others often gets a bad rap. Young children are often called ego-centric and self-centered, as if that describes the extent of children's emotional make-up. It doesn't. In terms of early intellectual understanding, it is very hard for young children to separate themselves from the world around them. It's especially challenging for them to consider and interpret another person's perspective. Children sometimes even believe their individual actions and private thoughts influence all that happens around them.

But with growth and experience, children's perceptions about cause and effect become more accurate. With time, children realize they aren't responsible for making the world go around. And what a huge relief that must be! Imagine the burden and obligation children must feel believing they are accountable if loved ones become sad, angry, or ill.

Although children start out life with a singular vision, that outlook changes quickly. Compassion for others is first nurtured when children receive care from sensitive adults who respond quickly to infants' basic needs. In those supportive conditions, children's capacity for empathy blooms, even during the earliest months of life. For instance, babies in infant centers often cry in response to the tears of another child. Certainly, the babies don't know why another is crying. Yet they are sensitive to the cues that someone is experiencing tension and they respond in kind. Recognizing distress is a step children must accomplish before they can respond with sympathy.

By 12 months of age, children are able to tune in to and be sensitive to others' specific feelings, ranging from happiness to anger and even withdrawal and depression. As common sense tells us, infants are especially cued to and responsive to beloved family and regular caregivers.

By 18 months children respond actively to others' emotions. It may be with tears, but it may also be with a pat on the back when hugging a caregiver. Toddlers also smile, giggle, or stroke a loved one's hair or cheek to express affection and reaffirm an emotional connection. I've seen two year olds offer a crying child a toy and then encourage them by saying, "Be happy." And it's not unusual for a two year old to alert a classroom teacher when a friend is crying. They recognize their friend needs assistance and that tears are a friend's literal cry for help.

An empathetic two year old sometimes leads the teacher by the hand to a distressed peer; especially if the child is used to adults offering children timely, responsive help. Verbal twos will add the phrase, "Go, Tommy hurt," while escorting the teacher to a friend in need.

By ages 3 and 4 children are able to recognize and be compassionate with adults' stressful emotions. During a lively child care lunch time, a teaching colleague of mine had a preschooler pat her on the hand and say, "It makes you nervous when we're so noisy, doesn't it?" That preschooler was right on target! Her empathetic words and gentle touch helped the teacher relax because someone noticed and understood her feelings.

“Compassion  
for others is  
first nurtured  
when  
children  
receive care  
from sensitive  
adults.”

A parent of a preschooler told me she underwent medical treatment that included weekly shots. She was amazed at how empathetic her three-year-old daughter was. With a very concerned expression, her preschooler frequently asked her if the shots hurt and if she was okay. Kids know shots aren't pleasant, so compassion is an easier stretch!

All these examples reveal what big hearts young children can have. Gradually their emotional skills expand to support peers as well as loved ones. As a result, friendships bloom. The following story is among my favorite teaching memories.

Three boys, ages 3, 4, and 5 years played in the block center. Mike, age 4, put a lot of time and effort into his block building. His patience, planning, and creative thought paid off. His building was tall, towering on a sound foundation. It had columns in the front and matching pillars on the roof. He balanced the blocks just right so they stayed up.

As fate would have it, Mike's castle was accidentally knocked down by Jamal, age 3. Jamal's galloping tennis shoe brought Michael's impressive building tumbling down, block upon block. Crash! Clatter! Bang! Boom!

Mike hung his head, shaking it side to side. He broke into a sob with one tear rolling down his cheek. Then the dam broke. There was no mistaking that he was forlorn, frustrated, and felt defeated.

Walking to the scene I was ready to kneel next to Mike for good eye contact. At the tip of my tongue was an assortment of empathetic phrases, like: "It's frustrating having your building knocked down after all that work. How disappointing! I bet you're feeling pretty mad." And then, "It looked like it was an accident, but that might not make it feel any better." Yes, I was planning on being teacher with a capitol "T." I was ready to step in and save the situation, but five-year-old Adam beat me to it.

Before I got a word in, Adam sat on the floor right next to Mike. He swung his right arm across his bewildered friend's shoulder. He hung his head forward in sympathy with Mike. The two just sat there in silence. Adam squeezed Michael a one-armed hug every few seconds, but not a word passed their lips. It was like Adam was non-verbally commiserating, "Hey buddy, some days it's pretty tough in the trenches of child care."

Within two minutes, Mike stopped crying. He looked up into Adam's face, shook his head one last time, and started re-stacking blocks. Reality dawned on Jamal and he silently handed fallen blocks to Mike.

Wow, my job was pretty easy that day! The wisest thing I did was stay out of the shuffle and let Adam tend to Mike's emotional wounds. If I had stepped in too quickly, I would have robbed Adam of the chance of showing compassion to his classmate, his friend. And a lecture from me wouldn't have touched Jamal's conscience any more than witnessing Adam's silent empathy did.

Later at snack, I talked to Adam. I told him how kind it was of him to comfort Mike. I said thoughtfulness like that would win him lots of friends. In other words, I expressed admiration and reinforced Adam's emerging social skill — the ability to empathize with someone else's struggles and point of view. It's a requirement for being a good friend.

The last time I saw Mike and Adam together, they were entering high school. Through the years, they've maintained the bond that was seeded in preschool. Their long-lived friendship warms my heart; but more importantly, it continues to warm theirs.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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