



“What parents teach is themselves, as models of what is human – by their moods, their reactions, their facial expressions and actions. These are the real things parents need to be aware of, and of how they affect their children. Allow them to know you, and it might become easier for them to learn about themselves.”
– Magda Gerber

The Development of Empathy

By Elena Marouchos

No teacher likes to admit that an accident happened on their watch but unfortunately it did. The old adage “accidents happen” is true especially when working with toddlers. It seems like one minute I was entranced by rambunctious antics and infectious giggles and in the next I was attending to a bleeding nose. Although I know there is much learning that happens for both the children and teachers in these moments one still can't help reflect on how or what I could have done differently both in setting up the environment but also in my actions. But I digress. This is not a reflection on how and why accidents happen but rather on a moment that humbled me and made me review the literature and reflect on toddler compassion, empathy and most of all friendships and the development of empathy. That afternoon I witnessed an interaction so poignant, so gentle and lasting that after everything had passed I had to take a moment to compose myself and selfishly indulge in a long cuddle from a bemused toddler. Evidence of her amazing signs of compassion for her longtime

friend left behind in her portfolio for her to draw upon in future.

By the age of 2, children normally begin to display the fundamental behaviors of empathy by having an emotional response that corresponds with another person. It is not uncommon for one set of tears to bring forth another set from another. It is in these instances that, at times, I wish I were an octopus and now appreciate the image of eastern religious deities of a ‘mother’ God with many arms ready to embrace. It starts off with them being distressed at seeing another's distress and evolves into scenes where sometimes, the toddlers will comfort others or show concern for their friends. But guess what all this emotional learning does not stop there for our toddlers for it is also during this period that toddlers will play games of falsehood or “pretend” in an effort to fool others, and this requires that the child know what others believe before he or she can manipulate those beliefs. As a beginning teacher I find this the most challenging behaviour to deal with. It not only requires you to know

The Development of Empathy - continued

this child incredibly well but to be able to distinguish between being distressed at another's distress, especially when the floodgates and wailing start and knowing which ones are developing working theories that include 'oh, I get a cuddle/ reaction/cream when I cry or tell you I have a sore...' This behaviour too requires acknowledgement, but a change in tone, a bit of patience and lots of explanation and talk about emotions, genuine signs of hurt and why perhaps they had to wait for a cuddle or I asked that they have a lie down on the pillow until they are not feeling so sad and are ready to join their friends. Typically the toddlers at this stage are verbal and inevitably when you ask what is wrong the words they use will be directly related to the scene they have just witnessed e.g. 'sore' – pointing to an old injury, bruise or scratch, 'ice' or 'cream' if they have just seen this being applied.

My review of the literature made me wonder about sympathetic versus empathetic behaviours and in the process I stumbled across a new word – 'emotional contagion'. In summary:

**Sympathy is,
"I'm sorry for your pain."**

**Emotional Contagion is,
"I feel your pain."**

**Empathy is,
"I understand how you feel."**

This made me wonder where in this range of developing empathetic behaviours would a toddler who had a recent and similar experience be? It made me question some of the instances where I had possibly assumed a child was aiming for the sympathy vote or showed distress at another's distress and wondering if the incident triggered a memory and instead was trying to say "I feel your pain". Perhaps my own understanding of this is incomplete but either way it served to review my own practice and think more clearly when

assessing behaviours in these moments and trying to deliver a response more meaningful to the child.

Empathy is for grown ups?

When I reflect upon the myriad things children learn in their second year of life empathy may not seem to be at the forefront. It still seems ingrained to many of us, perhaps because of our own developmentally orientated childhoods, that walking, fine motor skills, rudimentary language, etc. probably first come to mind. While browsing for gifts over the holidays I noticed that even the toys and books primarily enforce these skills – blocks, shape sorters, books with first words like colors. Not that there is anything wrong with these in the environment but in reality the world around is full of colour, shape and number and if we believe that children have a driving need to explore the world around them then surely by ensuring a safe and emotionally secure environment and offering them plenty opportunities for free play then surely they will learn their colours and numbers?

*At 7-9 months of age infants understand the concept of attention to objects by others. This shared-attention is result of the baby understanding that a person besides themselves finds an object of interest, and hence has a different thought. (*Baron-Cohen, S. (1991). Precursors to a theory of mind: Understanding attention in others. In A. Whiten (Ed.), Natural theories of mind: Evolution, development and simulation of everyday mindreading (pp. 233-251). Oxford: Basil Blackwell*)

*At 12 months old infants can predict the behavior of someone else, an essential ingredient of empathy. (*Falck-Ytter, T., Gredebäck, G., & von Hofsten, C (2006). Infants predict other people's action goals. Nature Neuroscience, 9 (7), 878-879. (PDF 138kB)*)

*18 month olds show understanding of another person's goals and intentions but do not do so for inanimate objects. (*Meltzoff, A. (1995). Understanding the intentions of others: Re-enactment of intended acts by 18-month-old children. Developmental Psychology, 31, 838-850.*)

*24 month olds display comforting behavior.
"Recent developments in research cast doubt on early conceptions of young children as primarily egocentric and uncaring of others' needs. Studies reviewed indicate a broad range of social competencies children bring to their interpersonal relationships. As early as 2 years of age, they show (a) the cognitive capacity to interpret, in simple ways, the physical and psychological states of others, (b) the emotional capacity to experience, affectively, the state of others, and (c) the behavioral repertoire that permits the possibility of attempts to alleviate discomfort in others." (*Zahn-Waxler, C., & Radke-Yarrow, M. (1990). The origins of empathic concern. Motivation and Emotion, 14, 107-130.*)

The Development of Empathy - continued

Why is empathy important?

Empathy is the foundation for a variety of skills and attitudes that I aspire for all children as:

- Empathy is necessary for successful social relationships
- Empathy leads to increased academic achievement
- Empathy leads to creativity
- Empathy decreases violence and aggression, including tantrums!
- Empathy is the root of a global worldview
- Empathy reduces prejudice and builds tolerance
- Empathy is the root of biophilia – the love of life and living system and respect for living things in general

From the above we can see that nurturing empathy is just as important as the other skills like walking, reading etc.

Model, model, model.....

How can we facilitate this learning? Well we have to remember that:

“Our children are watching us live, and what we are shouts louder than anything we can say.”

(Wilferd A. Peterson)

That must be frustrating for them.” When something drops on the floor or on your foot, breathe and say ‘that hurts, it’s sore...It slipped or I dropped it because...’. Explain, explain – the cause and effect. It is also important to name your and their emotions because this helps them to understand not only the emotions (sad, happy, frustrated etc) but also why.

I truly agree that of all the skills we encourage our children to develop, social intelligence may be the most essential for predicting a fulfilling, successful life. As parents and teachers we can have a profound influence in this regard and therefore it is important that we are aware of this as every word, move and gesture are being observed... We also need to curb our natural tendency to intervene too soon and ‘protect’ our children when they seem challenged as these good intentions can spoil rich opportunities for physical, cognitive, creative, social and emotional development. Instead we need to realise that we’re the ones under the microscope and everything we say and do is modelled. This has to be the best motivation for being gracious and respectful during our interactions and more importantly for some of us to heal old wounds by doing it “better” than it was done for us.

When a baby falls down or gets hurt, even if it is obviously a minor injury, our instincts might tell us to rush over, pick her up immediately and shower her with sympathy or distraction in an attempt to calm her as quickly as possible.

Magda Gerber advised something a little different and counterintuitive (especially for those who find a baby’s cries difficult to hear...namely, all of us!). She encouraged parents and caregivers to remain calm so as not to add our alarm or distress to the equation, and to take our cues from the child. She also suggested that we take the time to reflect on the experience to help the baby understand it, acknowledge her feelings and support her to express them freely and completely.

Teaching empathy isn’t just about helping children develop feeling words but about showing them empathy and displaying empathy for others in our own actions. Toddlers are notorious parrots and the words we hear in the toddler room are indicative of scenes they witness. As adults we have a choice and yes it’s easy to give into the emotion but we have to try and remember that there is a listening, absorbing being in the vicinity. When someone cuts us off in traffic I can let road rage take over or I can say “they must be in a hurry.