

Teaching Empathy to Visually Impaired Children¹

Have you ever considered the value of empathy? We think through the words or actions we are about to impart and consider how our suggestion or contribution will be taken. It's the reason we know how to treat others; it allows us to know what not to say, and it allows us to contemplate how to present ourselves during a job interview, at a work meeting, in a recreational club, to a customer, or to a potential friend.

It takes empathy, understanding the feelings of others, to build successful relationships.

A sighted child begins to gather information about others' feelings after understanding her own feelings and identifying similar feelings in others by observing facial expressions. A child who is blind or visually impaired will need to be taught to identify her own feelings, to understand others have feelings that differ from her own feelings, and to recognize one's words and actions can alter others' feelings.

Empathy typically emerges in preschoolers and young grade schoolers, yet its intentional instruction should begin in babies and toddlers.

Teaching empathy involves:

- helping the child understand her own feelings across a variety of circumstances ("You fell down and bumped your knee. That hurts. I will hold and comfort you."), as empathy develops after identifying one's own feelings
- repeatedly describing your positive, negative, and neutral emotions to your child in a variety of circumstances
- pointing out other's feelings as you notice them
- asking others to describe their feelings to your child
- discussing how your child affected the feelings of another ("When you hit Maggie, she seemed scared and hurt. She cried.")
- prompting your older toddler to consider how a friend or sibling feels ("How do you feel when you fall down and get a boo-boo? That's how Lamar feels too. He hurts.")
- coaching your child to listen to tone of voice ("Grammy sounds excited! She is smiling. I can hear the happiness in her voice.")

¹ <http://www.familyconnect.org/info/browse-by-age/infants-and-toddlers/transition-to-independence-landt/teaching-empathy/1235>



- telling stories or reading books that involve a character describing emotions
- using pretend play to highlight emotions
- providing your child with feedback on positive and negative social encounters ("When you said hi to our new friend, he smiled. Thank you for helping him feel welcome.")
- explaining why we dress or act in a certain way ("We can't talk now because Pastor John is preaching. Others are trying to listen.")

