

Help Prevent Children From Becoming Bullies

Having profound empathy for others increases feelings of care and diminishes feelings of anger, hostility and hatred – emotions which can lead to bullying. Children who bully progressively lose empathy for their victims so it is important to build empathy to help stop your children bullying – and to make it less likely that they bully in the first place.

What is *empathy* - is it the same as *sympathy*? There is actually a subtle difference in meaning between sympathy and empathy. When you sympathise with someone you acknowledge what has happened, you express a desire to make things better and you express sorrow that something has gone wrong for the person. When you empathise with someone you ‘put yourself in the other person’s shoes’ – you perceive how they feel, experience how they feel and understand their situation, feelings and motives as though they were your own.

How can I increase my children’s empathy for others?

You could discuss bullying situations such as those below with your children.

Angharad had removable braces fitted. Girls outside her friendship group got paperclips and put them in their mouths saying, ‘Oh, what nice braces we have.’

Ask your children how Angharad might feel. (She might feel embarrassed, hurt and ugly to look at. She might believe that everyone thinks the same as the girls who made fun of her.) What might be the consequences of the bullying? (Angharad might stop smiling so that people won’t see her braces. She might not want to wear the braces any more – she might take them out as soon as she leaves home or gets to school which will mean that the position of her teeth and jaw won’t be corrected.)

How could your children help Angharad? (They could tell off the girls who had made fun of Angharad and tell the teacher what they had done and reassure Angharad that the girls meant nothing by it other than to be nasty. They could say how wonderful Angharad's teeth will be when she has finished her treatment and that there are many children with crooked teeth – soon plenty of children in the school will be also wearing braces.)

Charley has no friends. When a teacher shouts at the whole class he cries; and when children mention his dad he cries and looks scared. The others in the class laugh at him and call him a freak because of his behaviour and because he has no friends.

Ask your children how Charley might feel. (He might feel worthless, despised, lonely and isolated from everyone. He might also feel afraid – of other people as well as his dad – and might have lost trust in people generally.) What might be the consequences of the bullying? (Charley might believe that he will never have a friend or be liked and think that his future is hopeless. He might believe he is a freak and that there is nothing he can do to change it. He might become seriously depressed and consider suicide.)

How could your children help Charley? (They could show Charley that someone does care about him by befriending him. They could comfort Charley when he's upset, avoid shouting and ask someone in the school to check that he is OK at home.)

Invite your children to tell you about bullying situations they have come across and discuss them in a similar way to the situations described above. If they were personally involved, find out how your children felt – either as bully or victim.

Be a strong role model for caring behaviour

Apologise to your children when you make a mistake – and ask for an apology when they do something hurtful to you. Allow your children to correct you; this should make them more receptive to you when you tell them off.

Show care to friends and neighbours. For example, when a neighbour has a crisis such as bereavement, help out with preparing food, shopping or looking after her children. Let your children hear you express your sympathy and discuss with your children how sad it is for your neighbour. It is especially important for boys to see their fathers in a caring role.

When you see someone in trouble offer to help. I was in an out of town shopping centre, returning to my car. An elderly couple passed my daughter and me, walking towards the shops. The man had to stop every few paces to cling onto a bollard to get his breath back. I asked if they wanted help and for me to get a wheelchair for him. This is not to suggest that children should offer to help strangers but to follow your example by offering to help a child in distress in school.

Intervene to help other people or to put something right. Adrian was travelling on the train when a group of rugby supporters got on. They lit up. Adrian pointed to the No Smoking sign and said, ‘Smoking in trains is not allowed.’ Although the supporters did not put out their cigarettes straight away, other passengers became emboldened and backed Adrian up. The supporters extinguished their cigarettes. Again, it would be inappropriate for a child to challenge a train full of adults. However, witnessing the effect of one person saying something and having all the bystanders join in might encourage your children to speak out when they witness bullying behaviour in school.

Be careful not to drop litter and to check that your children don’t drop it – this shows respect for other people and the local community.

Be friendly to your local shopkeepers and impress upon your children to be polite to them, especially if you use a corner shop - show you value the convenience of having them open early until late, sympathise with the long hours they must keep and ask after their health.

How can you counteract the media violence children are exposed to?

Watch family films with your child involving characters who care about one another and who resolve their difficulties through non-violent means. Discuss what happens and express sympathy when something goes wrong for a character. Ask your children how they would they feel if they had been that person to increase their feelings of empathy.

Research suggests that parents watching and commenting on films with their children reduces children's identification with the perpetrator of violence, reduces their perception of the violence as real, and reduces the likelihood that they will rehearse the observed violence later.

Explain how drama works. There has to be conflict in any story, including family stories. Towards the end of a drama either a workable solution is found or something changes to make the characters' lives happier.

Family problems need to be exaggerated in fiction to give impact and to make it vital that viewers or readers stay with the story needing to know how the difficulties are eventually resolved. Dramas are designed to keep us guessing to the last, often with increasing tension and conflict, to ensure we don't switch off or put the book aside. Just because your children see high levels of conflict on the television, or read about them in a book, this does not mean that all families operate like this or that theirs should.

Be careful about what young children watch – if your children do crave some more excitement try to find films and programmes with implied violence rather than ones that show all the gore.

Discuss fictional or real-life violent events, appropriate to your children's ages and emotional development, to help them to understand, for example, the devastation a parent or sibling feels when a child is hurt - or murdered - by school bullies.

Watch documentaries with your children, appropriate to your children's ages and emotional development, that highlight national and world social injustices or bring to light special difficulties people have. For example, you could watch and discuss programmes on child slavery, human trafficking, poverty, asylum seekers, children with disabilities or with particular medical conditions or people overcoming personal challenges.

Raising your children's empathy helps produce caring children who are better able to express their feelings verbally rather than taking out bad feelings on others. Having high empathy makes children more pleasant to live with – for now and in the future – and sets them up as great role models for any children they may have.

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