



## Empathy





“Empathy is... a kind of travel,” author Leslie Jamison writes in *The Empathy Exams*, “[i]t suggests you enter another person... as you’d enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query...” Empathy requires us to be respectful guests who observe, reflect, and seek to understand another’s experience. In order to develop the ability to feel another’s experience with them, we must extend ourselves—to travel, as Jamison says, across our borders and into someone else’s reality. Empathy allows us to “see into” someone else’s feelings, thoughts, and ideas and, hopefully, find where they intersect with our own feelings, thoughts, and ideas. At Fly Five, we define empathy as “the ability to recognize, appreciate, and understand another’s state of mind or emotions, to be receptive to new ideas and perspectives, and to see, appreciate, and value differences and diversity in others” (Turner et al., 2019). As one of our five SEL competencies, empathy is an essential aspect of education.

“

“Empathy is... a kind of travel”

”

Empathy is a powerful set of skills and tendencies that have been shown to make people better colleagues, family members, and friends (Miller, 2019) and can provide individuals with a more positive sense of self (Hasio, 2015). Empathy can be deployed to combat bullying, as it helps us understand differences and respect alternative worldviews (Miller, 2019; Erlich and Ornstein, 2010) and builds an awareness of our actions and their subsequent reactions. Empathy has also become the focus of organizations such as Forbes, encouraging companies to adopt “empathy and perspective-taking principles,” and the Harvard Business Review, naming empathy as one of the essential traits for excellence as both a leader and a performer (Goleman, 2014).



## Types of Empathy



As a psychological process that can be measured as both a trait and a state of mind, empathy is more complex than simply feeling what others feel. There are three different types of empathy, all of which are interrelated yet distinct (Powell & Roberts, 2017):

- **Cognitive empathy** refers to recognizing how a person may feel and think in an emotional situation. Cognitive empathy has been shown to predict positive social outcomes, such as helping behavior, injustice sensitivity, and compassion for others.
- **Emotional empathy** describes what we typically think of when we think of empathy: feeling with another person. Emotional empathy has been shown to explain the link between mimicry and prosocial behavior and facilitate social bonding. It may allow us to feel the consequences of our actions, thus helping us to better understand when and how we've affected someone. Emotional empathy has also been linked to altruistic motivations, where one helps someone else primarily to benefit the person being helped rather than for personal gain (Edele et al., 2012).
- **Compassionate empathy** encompasses feelings of sympathy, concern, or compassion for another. It is typically associated with positive actions, such as charitable behavior and a desire to help the other person deal with their situation and emotions.

Taken together, these three types of empathy are flexible and dynamic. They are affected by and can affect our daily lives; the type and level of empathy present will change depending upon the situation. However, we can take steps to build empathy as a muscle and increase the likelihood that our students are responding to any situation with compassion, kindness and, of course, empathy.





## Using the Stages of Skill Development to Develop Empathy

---

To help students build empathy and demonstrate it consistently, it is important to consider how skills develop via the four stages of skill development. The four stages begin with stage one, unconscious ignorance: students are unaware of a skill and unaware that they lack it. Stage two is recognition, when students are conscious of the skill but still unable to execute it. Stage three is awareness, when students are able to perform the skill but with conscious effort. And finally, stage four is when the skill is learned. This is when students possess unconscious ability--they can perform the skill without thinking about it.



To begin the learning cycle for empathy specifically, teachers can explain empathy to students. Using examples from the classroom or from books and curriculum materials, highlight moments where a student or character demonstrates empathy. Have students reflect on moments when they've shown someone empathy so they begin to see that it is something they are likely already practicing in their lives. As students' understanding of empathy deepens, integrate perspective-taking and empathy-building activities into the classroom so that reacting with empathy becomes second nature.

## Building Empathy

---

As students practice taking on other people's experiences and building their capacity for empathy, adults can focus on building skills in each of Fly Five's four empathy themes: respects differing cultural norms, recognizes and manages one's own emotions and the emotions of others, respects and values diversity in others, and aware of impact one's actions have on others. Below are strategies to explicitly develop empathy in students.

- **Expose students to diverse characters and stories:** Studies show that exposing children to diverse characters from other cultures can help to combat negative stereotypes and expand students' perspective-taking abilities. This can be done with fiction, nonfiction, and poetry (Zuckerbrod, 2018). Read diverse stories and encourage students to draw comparisons between themselves and the characters. Highlight the value of diversity and guide students to make connections between the diversity in books and the diversity in their real lives.



- **Increase emotional literacy:** Building students' emotional literacy is a crucial aspect of developing empathy. For younger students, consider having them identify how they feel on a given day with a chart depicting common emotions. With a partner, older students can practice checking in and having open discussions about how they are feeling (Borba, 2018). When students can recognize and name their emotions, they are better able to feel what other people are feeling.
- **Practice perspective-taking:** In addition to exposing children to diverse stories through literature, embed perspective-taking moments into the classroom routine. Ask questions such as "How would you feel in that situation?" or have students think through a conflict from the opposite perspective (Borba, 2018). When students can see another perspective, they are better equipped to embrace diversity and understand where another person is coming from.
- **Encourage emotional management techniques:** Helping students self-regulate their emotions helps build empathy as it helps them remain in control and think clearly enough to respond to situations appropriately (Borba, 2018). Mindfulness can help students self-regulate and increase empathy, as it helps them to remain in the moment and without judgment. This allows students to be more aware of the mental states of others and, additionally, separate themselves from overwhelming thoughts or feelings so they can respond constructively rather than reactively (Ridderinkhof, 2017).

When students learn to put themselves in other people's shoes and empathize with their experiences, they are better able to collaborate across differences. Fostering empathy is an ongoing process that requires adult modeling, perspective-taking activities woven into lessons, and clear, explicit boundaries for acceptable behavior. Cultivating empathy affords both teachers and students the ability to acknowledge and validate differences and find understanding, which lays the foundation for a more kind and just society right here in our classrooms.





## References

---

- Borba, M. (2018). "Nine competencies for teaching empathy." *Educational Leadership: The Promise of Social and Emotional Learning* 76(2) pp. 22-28. Accessed: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct18/vol76/num02/Nine-Competencies-for-Teaching-Empathy.aspx>
- Edele, A., Dziobek, I., & Keller, M. (2012). Explaining altruistic sharing in the dictator game: The role of affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and justice sensitivity.
- Ehrlich, Paul R., and Ornstein, Robert E. 2010. "Humanity on a Tightrope: Thoughts on Empathy, Family, and Big Changes for a Viable Future." Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Goleman, Daniel. 2014. "Why We Need Caring Classrooms." <https://danielgoleman.info/daniel-goleman-why-we-need-caring-classrooms-2>.
- Hasio, Cindy. 2015. "Are You Listening? How Empathy and Caring Can Lead to Connected Knowing." *Art Education* 69(1) 25-30.
- Jamison, Leslie. (2014). *The Empathy Exams*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.
- Miller, Claire Cain. 2019. "How to be More Empathetic." *New York Times Guides*. 31 January 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/year-of-living-better/how-to-be-more-empathetic>.
- Powell, P., Roberts, J. (2017). Situational determinants of cognitive, affective, and compassionate empathy in naturalistic digital interactions. *Computers in Human Behavior* (68):137-148.
- Ridderinkhof, A., de Bruin, E., Brummelman, E., Bögels, S. (2017). "Does mindfulness meditation increase empathy? An experiment." *Self and Identity*: 16(3). Accessed: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15298868.2016.1269667#:~:text=Preliminary%20evidence%20of%20mindfulness%20enhancing,awareness%20of%20self%20and%20others>.
- Turner, H., LaBelle, S., & Gerstner, C. (2019). *Standards for a course of study for teaching SEL skills K-8*. Turners Falls, MA: Center for Responsive Schools.
- Zuckerbrod, N. (2018). "Building empathy with stories." *Scholastic Teacher Magazine*. Accessed: <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/18-19/building-empathy-with-stories-/>.