



*In 1997, eleven-year-old Nathaniel Abraham from Pontiac, Michigan, told his friend that he was going to shoot somebody. He allegedly stole a gun and practiced his aim on stationary targets. Then he walked to a convenience store, pointed his gun at a stranger, and shot Ronnie Greene Jr. in the head. The eighteen-year-old youth died hours later. The next day the sixth grader bragged about the killing to his friends. At his trial, Nathaniel turned and looked at his mother and other relatives and showed no emotion as he was convicted. The sixty-five-pound youth became one of nation's youngest children charged with first-degree murder.*

*On February 1993, two-year-old James Bulger was separated from his mother in a shopping center in Liverpool, England. A security camera showed two ten-year-olds, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, leading the toddler away. The boys threw more than twenty bricks at the two-year-old, kicked him, tore off his lower lip, stripped him, and possibly molested him. They then left James's body on the tracks to appear as though the murder were accidental, and went into a video store to watch cartoons on television.*

*On a school snow day in northeast Pennsylvania, nine-year-old Cameron Kocher was playing Nintendo with Jessica Carr, age seven. A parent stopped the game because the kids had made a mess and the two had argued; Cameron went home angry. He then took a rifle from his family gun cabinet, went back and shot Jessica, and hid the spent cartridge. As Jessica's mother futilely tried to save her daughter, Cameron went back to playing Nintendo. Later he told the other kids who were crying over their friend's death, "If you don't think about it, you won't be sad."*

**S**hocking as these stories are, they are true. Each involved grade school children who knew it was wrong to kill but did. They were all cold-hearted kids without an ounce of empathy—the one virtue that experts say could possibly have stopped them from committing their horrific acts. The good news is that empathy can be fostered in kids, and we can begin when they are very young. Doing so may be the best hope for preventing yet another tragic story.

## **THE CRISIS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY**

Empathy, the first essential virtue of moral intelligence, is the ability to understand and feel for another person's concerns. It's the powerful emotion that halts violent and cruel behavior and urges us to treat others kindly. Because empathy emerges naturally and quite early, our children are born with a huge built-in advantage for their moral growth. But whether our kids will develop this marvelous capacity to feel for others is far from guaranteed. Although children are born with the capacity for empathy, it must be properly nurtured, or it will remain dormant. And therein lies the crisis: over the past years, many environmental factors that research has found to be critical to the enhancement of empathy are disappearing, replaced by more negative ones. Although there certainly are other conditions that hinder kids' capacities to feel for others, the following five factors are especially lethal in squelching empathy, and point to a crisis in its development.

### **Emotional Unavailability of Parents**

Studies find that when it comes to enhancing kids' empathy, not just any parent will do. Milestone studies by John Gottman of the University of Washington found that the parents who are best at developing empathy in their children are those who are both actively involved in their kids' lives and emotionally available. That's why it's especially troubling that total one-on-one time between parents and their kids has dwindled dramatically over the past few decades. A university study found that today's mothers who work outside the home spend an average of eleven minutes a day in exclusive quality interaction time with their children on weekdays and about thirty minutes on weekends. The data for fathers were only eight and fourteen minutes, respectively. Nonworking mothers didn't fare much better, devoting an average of thirteen minutes per day. A recent poll taken of children as young as nine years old revealed that only 40 percent of boys and 50 percent of girls spent almost all weekend with their parents, and 25 percent of the young boys reported spending no hours with their families. The emotional availability of parents is diminishing for a number of reasons, including parental illness, death, work, fatigue, and divorce. Whatever the cause, critical empathy-building moments for kids are being lost as well.

### **Absence of Supportive Fathers**

Research confirms what many have known all along: involved dads can make a major contribution to raising empathic kids. A long-term study begun in the 1950s, for instance, found that children whose fathers were positively involved in their care when they were age five were found thirty years later to be more empathic adults than those whose fathers were absent. Another study involving first-grade boys in intact families revealed that children whose fathers took more responsibility for their sons' discipline and schoolwork and were more involved in their children's personal problems had significantly higher levels of empathy. And this was true regardless of the father's own level of empathy.

Aside from the many fathers who don't take an active parenting role, there are the troubling numbers who have chosen to be completely absent from their kids' lives. A recent White House report found that fewer than 25 percent of young boys and girls experience an average of at least one hour a day of relatively individualized contact with their fathers. The figures are particularly staggering for African American children: in 1994, 60 percent of black children lived in one-parent homes. So another critical nurturer of empathy—good old dad—is not at home to teach the lessons of compassion and right and wrong.

### **Barrage of Cruel Media Images**

Over the past decade, our kids have been bombarded with television, movies, music, video and arcade games, and Internet content that emphasize violence, nastiness, and cruelty. It is affecting our kids. Here's why: behavior is generally learned by imitating observed experiences, so the more examples of caring our kids witness, the greater the chance that those will be the kinds of behaviors they copy. A number of studies have found that watching television programs with prosocial messages increases cooperation, sensitivity, and caring among children and that the children will tend to imitate those kind behaviors. Research also shows that those prosocial behaviors are substantially enhanced when parents watch with their children and discuss or role-play those kind behaviors.

Of course, the reverse is also true: the continual barrage of cruel images teaches our kids cruel behaviors that stifle their capacity for empathy. As Madeline Levins states in her book *See No Evil*, "There is a large body of research focusing on the effects of media violence on preschool children. Almost without exception, the research has found that viewing violence makes children more aggressive, more restless, more fearful, less creative, and less intuitive." The American Academy of Pediatrics points out that well over one thousand studies overwhelmingly conclude that viewing violent entertainment can increase aggressive values and behavior in children. They further state that viewing violence can desensitize

kids to empathy because it can decrease the likelihood that they will take action on behalf of victims when violence occurs.

### **Raising Boys to Mask Their Feelings**

Studies find that when it comes to emotions, parents raise sons very differently than they do daughters. Parents discuss feelings more and use a greater array of words for emotions with their daughters than they do with their sons. They also encourage their daughters to share their feelings, whereas boys are typically told to mask their emotional pain. Considering that a major determinant of whether a child develops the ability to feel for others is how well he understands and can express his own feelings, it is easy to see that parents' attitudes toward their son's emotional expression can hinder a boy's empathy development.

William Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, explains, "Research shows that boys begin their lives with a natural sense of empathy, which is antithetical to violence. By second grade boys seem far less attuned to feelings of hurt and pain in others and begin to lose their capacity to express their own emotions and concerns in words." In fact, boys learn that the only emotion that it is socially acceptable for them to express is anger; other feelings must be stifled. And as their anger slowly intensifies, their potential for empathy is diminished. The result, Pollack notes, can be lethal: "This is the process that pushes boys to wear a mask of bravado. And this, in large part, is what makes them violent."

### **Abuse in the Cradle**

Fascinating new research by Bruce Perry of Baylor College of Medicine finds that the first three years of a child's life are pivotal in building the capacity for empathy or planting the seeds of violence. A large determinant as to which way a child's moral development goes is how she is treated by her primary caregivers. Perry states that empathy can be greatly impaired in those first thirty-six months as a result of repeated stress—abuse, neglect, and trauma. Mark Barnett of Kansas State University

explains that if young kids “have not had their emotional needs satisfied, they may not realize that they need to be concerned about or sensitive toward others’ emotional needs.” Considering the staggering numbers of child abuse cases, we are forced to conclude that many of America’s youngest citizens may have dismal moral futures.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that nearly three million children were reported to child-protection service agencies for abuse and neglect in 1997; *one in three victims of physical abuse was a baby less than twelve months old*. Child Protective Services reports that three-quarters of child fatalities involve children under three years of age. Although reported cases of child abuse and neglect vary per agency, they appear to be declining. But that’s certainly no cause to celebrate: any report of child abuse is one case too many. Although your child may not be affected by these issues, chances are she will be associating with other kids who are. Because peers are moral influences, in the end all our kids are affected.

Many environmental factors identified as critical for the growth of empathy are dwindling. Although no one factor by itself predisposes a child to cruelty, researchers stress that the interaction of factors may be enough to trigger antisocial behavior. Therefore it’s vital that we do everything we can to counteract these negative influences by nurturing the core moral emotion of empathy. As long as we allow these negative influences to continue, many children’s capacity to feel for others will be extinguished, and their emotional lives will be empty.

## WHAT IS EMPATHY?

Empathy—the ability to identify with and feel another person’s concerns—is the foundation of moral intelligence. This first moral virtue is what sensitizes our kids to different points of view and increases their awareness of others’ ideas and opinions. Empathy is what enhances humanness, civility, and morality. Empathy is the emotion that alerts a child to another per-

son's plight and stirs his conscience. It is what moves children to be tolerant and compassionate, to understand other people's needs, to care enough to help those who are hurt or troubled. A child who learns empathy will be much more understanding and caring, and will usually be more adept at handling anger.

Our children are often exposed to an unsettling world of violence, drugs, cruelty, and incivility; empathy may be the best antidote. By learning to show empathy to others, our kids can help create a more tolerant, peaceful world. This chapter shows you proven ways to build empathy in your child so that she will develop the virtue that lays the critical foundation for nonviolence and for doing what is right because she feels it in her heart.



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

### *Signs of Strong Empathy to Share with Kids*

There are many ways people display empathy toward others, and the more aware that kids are of what those actions look and sound like, the more likely they are to incorporate those behaviors into their daily lives. Here are a few examples of empathy to discuss and role-play with your child:

#### *What People with Empathy Say*

"You look upset."  
 "I understand how you feel."  
 "I'm sad that you got hurt."  
 "That happened to me too once. It makes me feel sad for you."  
 "My heart is racing. I feel like I won, too."  
 "I'm happy for you."  
 Talk soothingly to those in pain.

#### *What People with Empathy Do*

Notice when people are hurting, and feel for them.  
 Tear up when they see someone crying.  
 Walk up to console others in pain.  
 Comfort another because they understand the person's hurt.  
 Feel excited for others when they win.  
 Wince when they see the hero hurt at the movies.  
 Mirror the facial expressions of the distressed person.

## HOW EMPATHIC IS YOUR CHILD?

The statements that follow describe behaviors usually displayed by children with strong empathy toward others. To evaluate your child's strengths in this first virtue, write the number you think best represents your child's current level on the line following each statement and then add all the scores to get her total score. If your child scores 40 to 50, she's in great shape with this aspect of moral intelligence. If she scores 30 to 40, she could benefit from virtue enhancement. A score of 20 to 30 shows signs of potential problems. A score of 10 to 20 reveals potential danger; consider getting help to increase this essential virtue.

5 = Always 4 = Frequently 3 = Sometimes 2 = Rarely 1 = Never

A Child with Healthy Empathy	My Child
Is socially sensitive; has a lot of feeling for others.	_____
Shows sensitivity toward the needs and feelings of others.	_____
Correctly reads others' nonverbal cues: gestures, body language, facial expressions, tone of voice.	_____
Readily picks up others' facial expressions and reacts appropriately.	_____
Recognizes when someone is distressed and responds appropriately.	_____
Shows she understands another person's feelings.	_____
Tears up or looks upset when someone else is distressed.	_____
Acts concerned when someone is treated unfairly or unkindly.	_____
Shows a willingness to understand someone else's point of view.	_____
Can verbally identify someone else's feelings.	_____
<b>Total Score</b>	_____

## THREE STEPS TO BUILDING EMPATHY

Empathy, the key emotion for supporting a sense of right and wrong, is a trait that emerges early in kids. Whether it blossoms or lies dormant largely depends on whether it is nurtured. There are three steps to building this crit-

ical aspect of moral intelligence. Because the foundation for empathy is the understanding of emotions, the first teaching step helps your child develop an awareness of emotions and develop a feeling vocabulary. He'll need this skill to successfully identify a wide variety of emotions so that he can tune in to the feelings of others. The second step provides ways to enhance your child's sensitivity to other people's feelings so that he'll become more aware of their needs and concerns. The last step helps expand your child's awareness of perspectives other than his own. Only then will he really be able to step into other people's shoes and feel with them. These three steps increase the empathic capabilities that your child will need to face a world that too often stresses apathy, cruelty, coldness, and self-centeredness.

Here again are the three teachable steps you can use to nurture this essential first virtue in your child and build her moral intelligence:

**Step 1:** Foster Awareness and an Emotional Vocabulary

**Step 2:** Enhance Sensitivity to the Feelings of Others

**Step 3:** Develop Empathy for Another Person's Point of View

## **STEP 1: FOSTER AWARENESS AND AN EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY**

*I was in an office with James and Jeremy, third graders at a school in Minnesota where I was consulting. Their teacher explained that although the boys seemed to have good hearts, they were forever making fun of classmates and didn't seem to grasp the hurt they caused. Their teacher warned them to stop, yet today they teased a boy to tears, so she wanted me to talk to them about it. I began by trying to understand their concept of teasing. "Is it ever OK to make fun of someone?" I asked.*

*"Sure," James said. "I make fun of Jeremy all the time, and we're still friends."*

*Jeremy agreed, "He makes fun of my hair all the time, but it's no big deal."*

*I said, "Some things we're teased about don't bother us much. What did you tease your classmate about today? It must have bugged him, because you made him cry."*

*“We just told Seth that he talks weird,” James said. “You can’t understand most of what he’s saying. So it’s not like it’s not true.”*

*“Seth probably has a speech problem,” I explained. “He must get teased a lot about it, and it bothers him. How do you think he feels being teased about his speech?”*

*The boys couldn’t answer. “How would you feel if you were teased about something you really cared about?” I asked. And again I was met with silence. “You saw Seth. How do you think he felt about being teased?” Now both boys looked clearly puzzled. Then it dawned on me: it wasn’t that these boys didn’t understand that teasing was hurtful. The problem was that they couldn’t identify how Seth felt about it, so it was almost impossible for them to empathize with his hurt. These boys simply didn’t have a strong enough emotional education to identify either how they might feel or how the other boy felt. They didn’t have a clue about how to imagine their victim’s discomfort.*

Of course we want our kids to be compassionate and sensitive to other people’s feelings. The problem is that many kids’ empathy potential is greatly handicapped because they don’t have the ability to identify and express emotions. They have tremendous difficulty feeling for the other person simply because they may not recognize the other person’s hurt, elation, discomfort, anxiety, pride, happiness, or anger. What these kids need is an education that provides stronger emotional intelligence: an adequate vocabulary of feelings and then the encouragement to use it. Once they are more emotionally literate and can understand their own feelings, their empathy will grow, because they will be far more capable of understanding and feeling other people’s concerns and needs. This first step will show you how to develop your child’s emotional literacy.

### **How to Listen to Your Child with Empathy**

*Last month I was in a long line at a ticket counter in the Scranton Airport with a number of other passengers eager to get home. One three-year-old boy was clearly agitated with the wait. As his mom finally reached the front of the*



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### *Eliminating Gender Bias*

When studies compare boys and girls on their emotional intelligence, males finish a distant second. As boys get older, they express fewer emotions—other than anger—than girls do. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, authors of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, claim that one reason boys may be so emotionally illiterate is that we discourage their emotional awareness in a number of ways. Studies show, for instance, that mothers take more time explaining their emotional reactions to their daughters and validating their feelings than they do with their sons. And those distinctions have a dramatic impact on the emotional development of girls. “The message the daughter gets,” explain Kindlon and Thompson, “is that it’s okay to be concerned about another’s feelings; her natural concern and empathy are reinforced.” Those are the very kinds of messages our boys need if they are to develop emotional competency.

*line, he began pulling his blanket from a bag, mumbling “I need Blankey.” His mother sternly told him to act like a big boy, and stuffed the blanket back in the suitcase. This just upset the boy more, and, wailing louder, he struggled to pull it out again. The tension escalated, and the embarrassed mom looked ready to spank her distraught child. At that moment, a boy about thirteen years old kneeled in front of the boy and softly said, “Are you scared your blanket’s going to get lost? Your mom’s going to carry that bag on the plane, so don’t you worry.”*

*The little boy immediately stopped crying and looked up at his mom, who confirmed that the bag holding his blanket would not be checked. The child’s relief was instantaneous. The mom thanked the older boy, then asked him how he knew what was bothering her son. He smiled and explained, “Whenever I traveled as a kid I used to worry my blanket would get lost, so I knew how he must feel.” I had just witnessed the power of empathy.*

John Gottman, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and the author of *The Heart of Parenting*, conducted two ten-year studies of 120 families. He found that kids whose parents acted as “emotion coaches” learned to acknowledge and master their emotions better; they were more self-confident and physically healthier. They also scored higher in math and reading, had better social skills, got along better with friends, and had lower levels of stress. Experts find that most parents generally don’t use the emotion coaching method, which is unfortunate, because it is found to greatly benefit kids’ emotional literacy as well as their empathy. There are four parts to the technique. To help you remember the parts, just think of the word *TALK*; each part begins with a letter of the word:

*T*—*Tune in* to your child’s feelings and listen with empathy.

*A*—*Acknowledge* what is causing the emotion.

*L*—*Label* how the child is feeling.

*K*—*Kindle* a resolution for the child’s need.

Here are the four parts to listening with empathy and how you might use them with your child:

***Tune In to Your Child’s Feelings and Listen with Empathy*** The first part is often the toughest for parents: listening calmly to your child with your ears, eyes, and heart. Tune in to her body language: it often tells so much more than her words. For instance, is she stressed or elated or angry or frustrated? Your job is to gather information to find out what is bothering her. Experts say the surest way to stop your child from sharing is to discount her feelings: “That’s nothing to be angry about,” or “You’re too old to get so upset.” So be supportive and don’t judge or discount her emotions. Because they convey your interest, sometimes the briefest of words, such as “Really,” “Oh?” or “Gosh,” are best at encouraging kids to continue talking.

***Acknowledge What Is Causing the Emotion*** The second part is to acknowledge what situation is causing your child to feel the way she does.

Sometimes you can easily figure out what is contributing to the emotion, and sometimes you'll have to ask a few questions to be sure you understand. Once you discover the issue, identify it: "When you find out you have soccer practice . . .," or "When you have to wait for Matt to call you to find out if he is coming over . . ."

**Label How the Child Is Feeling** The third part is to label the emotion you think your child is feeling and say it back to her. This step sounds so simple, but it is powerful because it validates that you understand how she's feeling. For many kids, just knowing you understand can be very healing. It also helps your child develop a stronger emotional vocabulary. Here are a few examples: "You seem nervous," "Do you feel irritated?" "Are you feeling frustrated?"

**Kindle a Resolution for the Child's Need** The final part is to help your child resolve her emotional need. It often is helpful to add a response that shows you empathize with her plight: "I can understand why you might feel that way," or "I'd feel the same way if that happened to me." Sometimes your child may want you to help her think of a solution to her problem, and other times she just wants to hear that you understand her need or desire. You can always ask, "Would you like some ideas on solving it?"

You don't always have to do the four parts in order. Include them in whatever way seems most natural in your conversation. Here are examples of how putting the four parts together might sound:

***Child's Concern***

"I don't want to go to soccer practice."

***Parent's Empathic Response***

"Do you notice that whenever you know you have soccer practice you feel a bit uptight because you don't think you can kick as well as the other kids? Would you like me to help you think of how to improve your kicking?"

***Child's Concern***

"I don't ever want Matt coming to this house again."

"I hate going to the doctor."

"That camp is stupid."

***Parent's Empathic Response***

"It seems that whenever you invite Matt to come over, you get irritable. Is it because he takes so long to call you back, and you're stuck waiting? I can understand why you might be upset."

"Whenever you have a doctor's appointment, you are afraid he's going to give you a shot. This time you won't have to have a shot."

"Staying away from home seems to make you feel a little anxious because you don't know the other kids. Let's see if someone you know is going to be at the same camp this year. Would that help?"

### **Four Ideas to Help Kids Develop a Stronger Emotional Vocabulary**

Of course, no child is comforting and caring all the time, but some kids are definitely more compassionate, and for years psychologists have pondered why. Recent studies offer a helpful hint: kids who are more empathic are generally more emotionally literate. In other words, these kids understand how to recognize and express their emotional states and those of others. How well kids can identify feelings depends in part on whether they have an accurate emotional vocabulary. These next activities are designed to help kids develop a stronger emotional vocabulary so that they have the skills to recognize feelings in others.

**1. Use feeling questions.** To enhance your child's emotional vocabulary, use words and questions that help your child tune in to feelings; for example, "You seem [tense, anxious, worried] about something. What's the matter?" or "Your friend seems really [unhappy, angry, upset]. What



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### *An ABC Emotional Vocabulary*

In order for kids to read the feelings of others, they must have an adequate emotional vocabulary. To enhance your child's emotional intelligence, teach him the feeling words in the list that follows. Consider using a different feeling word each day or a new word each week.

<b>A</b>	confused	<b>F</b>
afraid	content	fatigued
agitated	critical	fearful
alarmed	cross	fidgety
angry	curious	frightened
antsy	cynical	frustrated
anxious	<b>D</b>	funny
apprehensive	depressed	furious
ashamed	delighted	<b>G</b>
awful	disappointed	glad
awkward	discouraged	gloomy
<b>B</b>	disgusted	greedy
bashful	distressed	grouchy
bewildered	disturbed	guilty
bitter	down	<b>H</b>
bored	<b>E</b>	happy
brave	eager	hassled
<b>C</b>	edgy	hateful
calm	embarrassed	helpless
caring	encouraged	hesitant
cautious	enraged	hopeful
cheerful	enthused	horrible
comfortable	exasperated	hostile
concerned	excited	hurt
confident	exhausted	hysterical

*An ABC Emotional Vocabulary, continued*

**I**

impatient  
indifferent  
inferior  
insecure  
intense  
irate  
irked  
irritated

**J**

jealous  
jittery  
joyous

**L**

lazy  
leery  
lonely  
loved  
loving

**M**

mad  
mean  
mischievous  
miserable  
moody

**N**

nervous  
nice  
numb

**O**

overwhelmed

**P**

panicky  
patient  
pessimistic  
pleased  
proud  
puzzled

**Q**

queasy

**R**

rejected  
reluctant  
resentful  
restless  
ridiculous  
riled  
rushed

**S**

sad  
safe  
scared  
secure  
sensitive  
shaky  
shocked  
shy  
silly  
sleepy  
sorry

stressed  
surprised  
suspicious  
sympathetic

**T**

terrified  
tired  
troubled

**U**

uncomfortable  
unsafe  
unsettled  
upset

**V**

vicious  
victorious

**W**

warm  
weary  
wonderful  
worried

**X**

excited  
exhausted

**Y**

yucky

**Z**

zany

do you think is bothering her?” Once your child develops an emotional vocabulary, ask often, “How do you feel?” or “How do you think he feels?”

**2. Say your feeling ABCs.** Each night with her two preschoolers, Jane Brewer, an educational administrator and mom, plays a fun game called Feeling ABCs. “We say the alphabet together,” explains Brewer, “but for each letter we also try to include a feeling word. So it goes something like this: *A, angry; B, brave; C, calm;* and so on. We usually don’t get beyond *G*, but the point is we’re having fun together, and my kids are also learning a feeling vocabulary.” You might want to try this idea with your kids.

**3. Have feelings with dinner.** This activity helps family members tune in to each other’s conversations and at the same time learn to express their feelings. One night or more a week, have a dinner conversation that includes discussing the feelings each member had during the day. You might begin by picking a feeling—such as proud—and asking, “What was the proudest moment you had this week?” Then everyone can take turns sharing his or her experiences, starting with the stem, “I felt proud this week when . . .” Some families even like to vote on who had the most interesting (or unusual, exciting, different) experience.

**4. Create feeling cards.** Gather a set of three-by-five index cards, scissors, glue, a pen, and old magazines. On each card, write the names of some of the most common emotion words, starting with just a few and then adding more as older ones are learned. For very young children, include only the six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust. Then help your child find pictures from magazines or computer programs to depict each emotion; glue them onto the corresponding card. Now use them like flash cards. Show your child the picture and ask him to guess the feeling. Later you can tell your child the emotion word and have him act it out with his face and body or discuss a time when he experienced the emotion.

Older kids can use a much more extended list of emotion words. Each week, make a few cards (depending on your child’s age and learning aptitude) containing new feeling words from the preceding Moral Intelligence Builder, “An ABC Emotional Vocabulary.” Use the cards

throughout the week to help expand his emotional vocabulary by playing games with the words. Here are a few games you can play with your child for any feeling word. These examples use the emotion of anger: think of synonyms [furious, incensed, irate]; name antonyms [calm, peaceful, serene]; identify times you felt angry; name body signs that tell you you're angry [flushed cheeks, rapid heartbeat, clenched fists]; and describe a time you've seen another person experience anger.

## STEP 2: ENHANCE SENSITIVITY TO THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS

*It was Colby's sixth birthday, and his mom, Mary, was cutting pieces of his birthday cake to serve his friends. The children lined up, plates in hand, waiting to be served. Ronnie, Colby's best friend, was next, and Mary noticed that he had a plate in each hand. "Extra hungry, Ronnie?" she laughed.*

*The six-year-old smiled. "No, I just thought I'd bring a piece to Daiwana."*

*"How nice, Ronnie," Mary answered. "Did she ask you to bring her one?"*

*"No," Ronnie whispered. "She just looks like she might like one. She's been sitting by herself and seems kind of sad. This might make her feel better."*

*Mary turned and saw the little girl sitting rather forlornly by herself and recognized that she did seem sad. She marveled at Ronnie's sensitivity; while everyone else had overlooked the little girl, Ronnie hadn't missed it. In fact, Ronnie always seemed to pick up on other people's feelings, and Mary wondered how she could help her own son be more sensitive like Ronnie.*

Ronnie exemplified what it means to be emotionally sensitive: he recognized the emotional cues of his friend, interpreted them as sadness, then acted on them. One of the biggest reasons some kids are more sensitive is that they can correctly interpret people's emotional cues: their tone of voice, posture, and facial expressions. Without that understanding, a child is greatly limited in his ability to react to another person's needs.

## Six Simple Ways to Nurture Kids' Sensitivity

Here are six ideas you can use almost anytime to tune up your child's awareness of the feelings of others.

**1. Praise sensitive, kind actions.** One of the simplest and most effective ways of enhancing any behavior is by reinforcing the action as soon as it happens. So whenever you notice your child acting in a sensitive and caring manner, let her know how pleased it makes you feel: "Karen, I love how gentle you are with your baby sister. You pat her so softly, and it makes me so happy knowing how caring you are."

**2. Show the effect of sensitivity.** Sensitive, kind acts—even small ones—can make a big difference in people's lives, so point them out to help your child see the impact his actions made. "Derrick, your grandmother was so pleased when you called to thank her for the present." "Suraya, did you see the smile on Ryan's face when you shared your toys?"

**3. Draw attention to nonverbal feeling cues.** Pointing out the facial expressions, posture, and mannerisms of people in different emotional states sensitizes your child to other people's feelings. As occasions arise, explain your concern and share what clues helped you make your feeling assessment: "Did you notice Grandma's face when you were talking with her today? I thought she looked puzzled. Maybe she is having trouble hearing. Why not talk a little louder when you speak with her?" "Did you see the expression on Meghan's face when you were playing today? She looked worried about something because she had a scowl on her face. Maybe you should ask her if everything is OK."

**4. Ask often, "How does he feel?"** One of the easiest ways to nurture your child's sensitivity is to ask her to ponder how another person feels. As opportunities arise, pose the question often, using situations in books, TV, and movies as well as real life. "How do you think the mommy feels, knowing that her little girl just won the prize?" "The tornado destroyed most of the town in Georgia; see it here on the map? How do you think the people feel?" "How do you think Daddy feels hearing that his mom is

so sick?” Each question forces your child to stop and think about other people’s concerns, and nurtures sensitivity to their needs.

**5. Use the formula “feels + needs.”** Michael Schulman and Eva Mekler, authors of *Bringing Up a Moral Child*, reviewed studies and found that an effective way to increase sensitivity is to ask children questions to help them discover people’s needs and feelings. Such questions were found to expand children’s awareness of what people might be experiencing. As a result, the children became more sensitive to how they might be able to help. To use the idea with your child, look for occasions to draw attention to people’s feelings and then ask her to guess what the person might need in order to remedy the feeling. Here is how a parent might use the method:

*Parent:* Look at that little girl crying in the sandbox. How do you suppose she feels?

*Child:* I think she is sad.

*Parent:* What do you think she needs to make her feel better?

*Child:* Maybe she could use someone to hug her because she hurt her knee.

**6. Share why you feel the way you do.** One of the best ways to help kids become sensitive to others’ feelings is to share your own. Use situations as they arise to describe how you feel about them and why: “I’m so excited! My new computer is being delivered to me today.” “I am frustrated; yesterday the auto body shop told me that fixing the car would cost five hundred dollars, and now they say it’s going to cost a lot more.” “I’m so tired. The barking dogs kept me up all night.”

### **Five Fun Ways to Help Kids Read Nonverbal Emotions**

Drs. Stephen Nowicki and Marshall Duke, child psychologists at Emory University in Atlanta, conducted tests with more than one thousand children and found that one out of ten children, despite normal and even superior intelligence, has significant problems with nonverbal communi-

cation. The psychologists said that this disability prevents kids from recognizing particular emotional signals that are so important in getting along with others as well as interpreting the feelings of their peers. The researchers' recommendation: enhance your child's skills in reading non-verbal messages! Doing so will not only boost her interpersonal skills but



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

### *Nine Factors That Favor the Development of Empathy*

**S**uzanne Denham, author of *Emotional Development in Young Children*, identified nine factors that researchers say generally increase the chances that a child will display more empathy (although there are certainly no guarantees):

1. *Age.* The ability to take the perspective of others increases with age, so older children are generally more empathic than younger kids.
2. *Gender.* Younger children are more likely to empathize with a peer of the same sex because they feel a greater sense of commonality.
3. *Intelligence.* Smarter kids are more likely to comfort others because they are better able to discern other people's needs and devise ways to assist them.
4. *Emotional understanding.* Children who freely express their emotions are usually more empathic because they are more capable of correctly identifying other people's feelings.
5. *Empathic parents.* Kids whose parents are empathic are likely to become empathic themselves because the parents model those behaviors, which in turn are copied by their children.
6. *Emotional security.* More assertive and well-adjusted kids are more likely to assist others.
7. *Temperament.* Kids who are by nature happier and more social are more likely to empathize with a distressed child.
8. *Similarity.* Kids are more likely to empathize with those who they feel are similar to them in some way or with whom they have shared a similar experience.
9. *Attachment.* Kids are more likely to empathize with their friends than with those to whom they feel less closely attached.

also nurture the development of empathy. The following are five good ideas for getting started.

**1. Play “Guess the Feeling.”** Brainstorm as many different feeling words as you can and write each of them on an index card. Turn all the words face down or put them in a box or basket. Tell family members they are to take turns drawing the cards one at a time. Each person then acts out the emotion using only his or her body. No words are allowed. Everyone else tries to guess the emotion that is being acted out.

**2. Make comic mood characters.** Cut out with your child an assortment of pictures from newspapers and magazines showing people depicting a wide array of different emotions. Glue them onto paper. Guess together how each person feels based on how his or her body looks; help your child draw balloons over each person’s head and together write inside what you think he or she may be saying. Tell your child she has just designed comic mood characters.

**3. Read with feeling!** This activity helps children recognize that our tone of voice conveys moods. Start by reading any children’s literature selection. Reading the same short passage each time, give your voice a different emotional tone [bored, excited, tired, sad, angry] and challenge your child to identify the tone. Take turns reading or role-playing the same passage or different ones with your child.

**4. Watch TV silently.** Turn off the sound on your television and watch the show together. Make a game out of trying to guess how the actors feel, just from what you see. Point out the kinds of nonverbal behaviors people do to express their feelings. (A person exhibiting tension behaviors might rapidly blink her eyes, twirl her hair, grind her teeth, clench her fists, and tighten her jaw. A person showing uninterested behaviors might roll his eyes, look away, walk away, or turn away from the speaker. A person expressing interest might nod, lean into the speaker, smile, raise her eyebrows, or stand or sit close to the speaker.)

**5. Hold a feeling watch.** With your child, watch other people’s faces and body language at the shopping mall, grocery store, park, or play-

ground. Try together to guess their emotional state without hearing their conversation: “How does her body look now?” “How do you think he feels?” “Look at the expression on her face. What do you think she’s feeling right now?” “Listen to the sound of that man’s voice. How do you think he feels?” “Look how that girl is standing with her fists so



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

*A Story to Tell Kids About Empathy*

**M**ichael Crisler, a first grader in Denver, Colorado, was born with a rare birth defect that left him with severe facial deformities. By the age of seven, he had already experienced several painful surgeries. So when he read about the tragedy of the Oklahoma bombing, Michael identified with the victims’ pain and was particularly moved by the plight of the children at the America’s Kids Day Care Center in the ill-fated Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. “I know what it feels like,” he explained, “because I’ve been in a hospital, too.” So Michael decided to do something to aid the smallest victims of the bombing by organizing a local bowl-a-thon. Its success surpassed his wildest dreams. He raised one of the largest single cash donations: \$27,077. The check, which he proudly presented to then Oklahoma governor Frank Keating, was set aside as a relief fund for survivors and families of victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. Michael explained, “I wanted to do this to help little kids.” The first grader’s remarkable sensitivity toward the Oklahoma victims and his desire to do something to comfort them because he understood their pain clearly showed he is a child with empathy.

Michael found out about the Oklahoma bombing victims by reading about it in the newspapers and seeing it on television. Even though he never personally met any of the victims, he felt their distress. That’s what empathy is: you understand and feel other people’s concerns and needs so well that you want to do something to make their situation better. There are many people each day who could use comforting and support. They might live next door to you or across the ocean in a different country. So keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to make a difference in people’s lives. Showing empathy is one way you can make the world a more caring place. What could you do?

tight. See the scowl on her face? What do you think she's saying to the other girl?"

### STEP 3: DEVELOP EMPATHY FOR ANOTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW

*Recently I was visiting a first-grade classroom in Dayton, Ohio, and the teacher had just asked her students to join her on the rug to hear a story. While the children eagerly gathered to sit in a circle around her, one boy sat by himself with his head in his hands a few feet back from his classmates. I wasn't the only one to notice the isolated child: Joey, another six-year-old, was trying to figure out the situation. He quietly began inching his way back until he was seated next to the boy. Then he leaned over and whispered something in the boy's ear. The other child nodded shyly and smiled back. Joey patted him on the back, then both boys turned to listen to the story.*

*As soon as the teacher dismissed the students to their seats, my curiosity got the best of me, and I pulled Joey aside and asked what he had said that had such an effect on the other child. "Dashon just looked lonely," Joey explained. "He just moved here and doesn't know many kids, so I asked if I could sit with him. I just knew how he felt: Dashon needed a friend."*

I had just witnessed a six-year-old with remarkable empathy: Joey recognized his classmate's loneliness and identified with his distress. And because he could imagine how it feels to be alone, he extended kindness to the dejected boy. Even at a young age, Joey already was capable of taking the view of the other person so that he was able to extend empathy.

Dr. Ezra Stotland from the University of Washington was one of the first researchers whose work demonstrated the development of empathy. The subjects in Stotland's study were asked to watch as a person reacted to heat being applied to his hand. The subjects didn't know that the victim was actually Stotland's assistant, who had been taught to act as if he was feeling pain: the "heat" didn't really exist. When the subjects were told just to focus on the assistant's movements, they reported very little empa-



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

### *The Stages of Empathic Development*

**M**artin Hoffman, a renowned authority on moral development, believes children slowly develop empathy in a series of stages, in which they gradually move from an egocentric, self-centered, “always thinking about me” perspective to one in which they not only care about the other person but also can feel and understand the other person’s point of view. The more you understand these stages and your child’s current empathy level, the better you will be at helping her reach the next stage. Keep in mind that because kids vary enormously in their experiences and abilities, the listed ages should serve only as a guide. The following stages are adapted from Dr. Hoffman’s acclaimed work.

**Stage 1: Global empathy** **The first year of life**

The child cannot clearly distinguish between himself and his world, so he is unclear as to who is experiencing the distress and interprets it as his own. *The six-month-old baby heard another baby cry and began to cry too.*

**Stage 2: Egocentric empathy** **Beginning around age 1**

The child’s reactions to others in distress begin to slowly change. She now understands that another person’s discomfort is not her own. *The two-year-old saw her mommy crying, so she sat next to her and softly patted her arm.*

**Stage 3: Emotional empathy** **Early preschool years**

Around the age of two or three, the child begins to develop role-taking capabilities. He recognizes that someone’s feelings may be different from his, is better able to decipher the source of another person’s distress, and finds simple ways to offer comfort or show support. *“You look sad. Your car broke. You can use this one.”*

**Stage 4: Cognitive empathy** **Elementary school years, beginning around age 6**

The child can now see things from another person’s perspective, so there is a noticeable increase in her efforts to support and comfort those in need. The ability to use language to comfort others also substantially increases. *“That older woman looks like she needs help getting into the elevator,” Kelly thought; she held the elevator door open so the woman could walk in safely.*

**Stage 5: Abstract empathy** **Late childhood: ages 10 to 12**

The child can now extend empathy beyond those he personally knows or can directly observe to include groups of people he may have never met. *“The people in India look so hungry. If I sent some of my allowance each week, it might make them feel better.”*

thy for his “pain.” But when the researchers told the subjects either to imagine having the heat placed on their own hands or to suppose how the victim felt, the subjects reported noticeably more empathy.

Stotland’s research found that encouraging a child to imagine how the other person feels or to put herself in that person’s place is a powerful way to nurture empathy. This third step shows some of the most effective ways to help a child imagine another person’s feelings and thoughts so that she can really step into another person’s shoes and feel with him.

### **Three Simple Ways to Increase Children’s Role-Taking Abilities**

Years ago at a conference in Santa Clara, I had the good fortune of watching Virginia Satir, a renowned therapist and the author of *Peoplemaking* and many other classic books, conduct a marriage-therapy session. Satir began by asking a couple to sit in chairs across from one another on the stage. She explained that once in their chairs they were to assume the role of the other person by acting, thinking, and feeling only as his or her spouse would react. Then, before a packed room, under Satir’s guidance the couple began to role-play their marital problems totally from the other person’s view. At the conclusion of the session, both admitted they’d never seen the other person’s perspective before; they left the stage elated that they had finally been able to resolve a marital problem that had almost caused a divorce. The rest of the audience was spellbound. We had witnessed not only an enormously gifted therapist but also the power that perspective-taking has in increasing empathy. These next three ideas show ways to help your child imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people and see beyond herself.

**1. Switch roles to feel the other side.** The next time there’s a conflict between siblings, between your child and a friend, or even between you and your child, ask each participant to stop and think how the other person would feel if the roles were reversed. Then ask each person to talk about the problem as if she were the other person: “What would the other

person say and do?” The method can be a valuable way of helping each person gain a different perspective on a troublesome situation. It’s often helpful to use puppets with younger children so that each puppet represents a person in the conflict. The child can then act out the problem with the puppets.

You don’t have to use role switching only with conflicts: use it in any situation to help your child understand the point of view of the other people involved. “Why do you think Matt always insults everyone?” [He probably doesn’t feel really good about himself. Maybe bringing the other person down makes him feel he’s better.] “Why do you think Kelly is always following you?” [Maybe she’s lonely and doesn’t know how to make friends.] “Why did Dad yell at you?” [Because he’s trying to get the taxes done and feels really stressed right now.] Taking the other person’s perspective tends to enhance your child’s empathy, so use it often.

**2. Walk in my shoes.** Here’s a great tip that Jill, a mom of one of my ex-students, shared with me to help your kids understand your point of view. Jill explained that her twelve-year-old daughter, Kaysa, couldn’t understand why she was so upset when Kaysa forgot to tell Jill where she was. One day Jill said, “Step into my shoes and pretend you’re me. I don’t know where you are, and it’s getting dark. What am I saying and feeling?” Kaysa literally put on Jill’s shoes, pretending to be her and role-playing what she would say and feel about the predicament. Jill said Kaysa immediately apologized, explained she had just never realized Jill would be so concerned, and promised she would never forget to call home again.

You may want to try the technique with your child. Choose a real situation that concerns you, and have your child step into your shoes, imagining what it would be like to experience the event from your perspective.

**3. Imagine how the person feels.** To help your child identify with the feelings of others is to have him imagine how the other person feels about a specific circumstance. Suppose your child just sent a thank-you card to his aunt for the birthday present he received. Use it as an opportunity to help your child recognize his aunt’s feelings when she receives the card by

having him pretend to be the aunt. “Pretend you’re Aunt Jen right now. You open up your mailbox and find this card. How will you feel when you read what it says?” You later can expand the imagining technique to include individuals your child has not personally met: “Pretend you’re a new neighbor, and you’re moving into this town and don’t know anyone. How will you feel?” Asking often, “How would you feel?” helps children grasp the needs and feelings of other people.

### Discipline That Builds Empathy

*Steve watched his nine-year-old son, Lucas, play baseball at the park with the neighborhood kids. Lucas was playing first base, and his team was ahead by three runs. Aaron, a seven-year-old, was batting next, and as soon as he*



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

### *Talking About Empathy with Kids*

**H**ere are some questions to discuss with kids to help them think about the importance of empathy in their lives.

- Have you ever seen a movie where you got teary-eyed because something sad happened to someone and you felt that character’s sadness? What was the movie? What made you so sad?
- What does empathy mean? Have you ever had a time when you felt the feelings of someone else? What does it mean when we try to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes?
- Do you know anyone with a disability? What kind do they have? Try to imagine what it feels like to have that disability. What would be the hardest part of having that disability? How do you suppose other people would treat you sometimes? How would you feel?
- What are some ways to let someone who is hurt or sad know how you feel? How do you think it makes the other person feel, knowing you understand how she feels?

*stepped up to the plate, Steve got nervous. Aaron was not only younger than the other kids but also less coordinated. He hoped the other players would show a little compassion for Aaron, never expecting the response from Lucas's teammates. "Easy out!" yelled the third baseman. Another shouted, "Hey, everybody, move in!" Then he heard his son yell, "Don't worry, guys. He couldn't hit a basketball." Steve was furious, and wondered how Lucas could be so insensitive. How was his son going to develop empathy when he was hanging around with a group of kids who obviously didn't care one bit about people's feelings?*

Sensitizing children to how someone else feels is a significant and serious enterprise. Research by Dr. Martin Hoffman and a number of others has shown that parents who consistently react to their children's misbehavior by focusing on the feelings of the person they harmed tend to have children who are more empathic. The four parts in the lesson that follows help turn children's insensitive moments into teaching tools that sensitize them to the feelings and needs of others and nurture the seeds of empathy. The four parts can be remembered with the acronym *CARE*:

*C*—*Call attention* to the insensitive, uncaring behavior.

*A*—*Ask*, "How would you feel?"

*R*—*Recognize* the consequences of the behavior.

*E*—*Express* and *explain* your disapproval of the insensitive action.

***Call Attention to the Insensitive Behavior*** Use this first part of the CARE lesson any time your child acts unkindly. It's an opportunity to sensitize her to the feelings of other people and to the disastrous effect unkind actions have on others; it's a critical step to developing empathy. As soon as you see an uncaring behavior, call attention to it. We're always more successful in helping kids change their behavior when we "nip it in the bud" before it has a chance to escalate and become a habit. Here are some examples of how to call attention to uncaring behaviors: "Making fun of Aaron by yelling out that he couldn't hit a basketball was very cruel." "Telling Bert to leave

because you wanted to play with Sally was inconsiderate.” “Not turning down your stereo when Grandpa asked you to was rude.”

*Ask, “How Would You Feel?”* Now that you have pointed out the uncaring behavior, help your child understand why the action was unacceptable. Ideally, we want our children to think about how their behavior affected the other person, but empathy does not always come naturally. A good place to start is by asking questions that help your child think about how she would feel if someone had done the same behavior to her. You might ask, “Lucas, how would you feel if Aaron yelled out in front of everybody that you can’t hit?” “If someone said that to you, how would you feel right now?” “Would you want to be treated like that?”

*Recognize the Consequences of the Behavior* The third part is to help children put themselves in someone else’s shoes and think how it feels to be the recipient of uncaring actions. Feeling from another person’s perspective is often difficult for children, but by using insightful questions we can gently guide them in considering the other person’s feelings—the foundation of empathy. Here are a few examples of questions that help children realize the impact of their uncaring actions: “Switch places and pretend you’re Aaron. How do you feel right now?” “Put yourself in her shoes. Tell me what you think she’s thinking.” “What do you think he would like to say to you?”

*Express and Explain Your Disapproval of the Uncaring Behavior* Finally, explain why you consider the child’s behavior to be unacceptable and insensitive. In plain language, explain what concerns you about the behavior and how you feel about uncaring actions. This is the moment for you to make sure your child clearly understands what is wrong about the behavior and why you disapprove. It will help your child shift her focus from herself and consider how her actions can affect other people. “I’m very concerned when I hear you treating people badly without considering

their feelings. I expect you to treat your friends the same way you would want to be treated.” “I am upset when you talk in that tone to me. It is disrespectful and uncaring, and I expect you to treat people with respect.”

The true parenting challenge is to use those unplanned moments when a child’s behavior is unacceptable as learning tools to help your child develop



## MORAL INTELLIGENCE BUILDER

*Finding Real Ways for Kids to Gain a New Point of View*

Many children lack empathy because their experiences have never allowed them to think about perspectives other than their own. Here’s a learning assignment that enhances children’s ability to feel from another point of view. It starts by asking your child to imagine having a disadvantage, such as living in a homeless shelter, having a learning disability, or being blind, deaf, or motor impaired. Any predicament that your child has not experienced will do. The goal is to stretch your child’s thinking about the situation so that he sees it from a different view. Then have him write, talk, or draw his view of what it might feel like if he had to live with the situation himself.

Next, invite him to actually experience the situation: visit a homeless shelter, juvenile hall, a prison, a nursing home, or a soup kitchen. Many teachers ask students to experience a disability by wearing a blindfold, sitting in a wheelchair, or not communicating using their voice for a period of time. When you return, have the child write about it again or talk about it, asking, “Is your perspective the same or different?”

Finally, go back and volunteer at the same place you thought about and then visited. Help the child really get to know the people, and then ask, “What happened to your feelings about the people now?”

Too often we rob children of really experiencing a situation from another point of view so that they never truly empathize with the individuals. There is no substitute for experiencing the real thing—especially when it comes to developing empathy. Look for opportunities for your child to experience different perspectives so that he can really understand what it feels like to walk in someone else’s shoes.

empathy. These are always the best lessons; they help the child discover for herself why she should be kind, and allow her to see that her uncaring actions may affect others.

### WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE CRISIS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY

- To teach kids empathy, you must show kids empathy. The best moments to teach empathy are usually not planned—they just happen. Capitalize on those moments to help your child understand the power that “feeling with others” can have.
- Expand your child’s emotional intelligence by asking often, “How do you feel?” Children must be able to identify different emotional states in themselves before they can become sensitive to the feelings of others.
- Know what your kids are watching and listening to; protect them from cruel, degrading, desensitizing images that can corrupt their empathic development.
- Children are likely to be more empathic if they understand why empathy is important and how it affects others. So point out the positive impact empathy can have on others.
- If you want your child to feel for others, expect and *demand* that your child feel for others.
- Tune up your empathic behaviors so your child regularly sees you show concern for other people’s “hurts and needs.” Then act on your concerns to comfort others so that your child can copy your actions.
- Provide opportunities for your child to experience different perspectives and views in your community—for example, by visiting nursing homes, homeless shelters, centers for the blind, pediatric wards, soup kitchens, veterans’ hospitals, and political campaign headquarters. The more your child experiences different perspectives, the more likely she will be able to empathize with others whose needs and views differ from hers.