

## How to Help Young Children Develop Empathy

When they see someone getting hurt or feeling sad—whether the person is a family member, friend, or stranger—we want our children to understand that person’s feelings, to see the world from his or her point of view, and to want to do something to help. In short, we want our children to grow up to have empathy for others. How does that happen?

### What is Empathy?

Dr. John Biever, a child psychiatrist and consultant to Pennsylvania’s Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Project, uses the metaphor of a three-legged stool to describe empathy and why it’s important.

- The first leg is empathic will—the desire to get outside of ourselves and feel what others are feeling.
- The second leg is empathic attunement—the ability to “tune in” to the words and nonverbal expressions to understand what others are feeling.

- The third leg is empathic responsiveness—how we respond to others in a way that they feel understood.

While all three legs are necessary, Dr. Biever believes that empathic will is the most important. How families interact with their young children, using these three legs of empathy, has a lot to do with whether the children will in turn grow up to have empathy for others.

### Tips for helping children develop empathy

- Establish a secure, strong, and loving relationship with your child.
- Empathize with what your child is feeling (“I know you’re scared of the barking dog. How about if I hold you until he goes away?”).
- Talk about how others are feeling (“Sally is sad because you took her toy.”).

*continued on back page*

**Tips for helping children develop empathy** *continued*

- Help the child think about what he or she can do to help the person who is hurting (“Bobby is lonely; perhaps you could ask if he would like a hug.”)
- Allow your child to feel what he or she is feeling, and don’t rush to fix the problem (“I know you’re angry you have to stop playing in the sand. It’s okay to be angry.”)
- Be a good role model (“I am really sorry that Jack’s mommy is sick. I’m going to make her some chicken soup to help her feel better. Would you like to come with me when I take the soup to her?”).

Dr. Biever gives three specific suggestions for parents to help foster empathy in children:

1. Have fun with your child.
2. Think like an adult, but feel like a child (see the world from the child’s point of view).
3. Remember that emotional age might not match chronological age (explore with the child what his or her world is like right now, even if the behavior is not age-appropriate).

He concludes with this hopeful note: “Empathically engaging our children will lead to a world populated by strong, virtuous, loved, and loving young people, eager to contribute to a world of good intentions.”

**R E S O U R C E S**

John Biever, M.D., three-part series on “*Empathy: The Magical Pathway to Joyful Relationships*”; <http://bit.ly/2MIRXs4>

*How to Help Your Child Develop Empathy, Zero to Three*;  
<http://bit.ly/2LgBJTQ>

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