

Encouraging Empathy in Pupils

Studies show that emotional empathy is developed in children as early as age 2, and where they have good attachment experiences and modelled behaviour, a child will develop a good level of empathy. Cognitive empathy develops slightly later on when children begin to understand that another person's way of seeing the world may be different to their own.

In school, the environment, people, values, systems and culture all help determine how pupils develop empathy. Here is a guide to help create the conditions in which empathy can thrive.

1. CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Develop a trusted, safe environment where pupils can talk about their feelings without fear of judgement, being shamed or belittled. This is in the context of whole-school values and within a classroom environment.

2. MODEL EMPATHY

Demonstrate empathy through the interactions you have with pupils and other adults. When they share their feelings or experiences, listen and validate them. 'It makes sense to me, given what you have told me, why you feel that way.'

10. FIND A BALANCE

Sometimes, we need to dial the empathy up for a distressed pupil or colleague, but having the dial turned up all the time will lead to compassion fatigue and overwhelm. We need to learn and know when it is best to dial it down too.

9. DEVELOP DEBATING SKILLS

To develop cognitive empathy, help pupils learn the skills of debating. Being able to hold your own perspective and also see that of another, takes practice.

8. DEVELOP LISTENING SKILLS

Being empathetic requires us to be really present "with someone" when they are in times of need. Teaching pupils active listening skills through games and role play will help.

7. MANAGE CONFLICT

As school life is so busy, telling pupils what to think, feel and do at times of conflict can seem like a quick solution. To develop empathy however, help pupils to stop, employ breathing and calm down techniques, actively listen and then respond.

6. DISCUSS CHARACTERS IN TEXTS

Develop cognitive and emotional empathy by regularly helping pupils to imagine and feel what it might be like for a particular character or group of people.

5. TEACH EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Improve pupils' understanding of their own emotions and expand their range of vocabulary. Discuss what it feels like on the inside and what shows on the outside when we have a particular feeling. Discuss with pupils instances when they may have felt a certain way.

4. DEVELOP SELF-EMPATHY

In order to have empathy for others, we first need to learn to have empathy for ourselves. Help pupils who are perhaps overly hard or dispassionate towards themselves, and encourage behaviours and thoughts which promote kindness and self-care.

3. ESTABLISH WHOLE-SCHOOL BUY-IN

Take time to establish whole-school buy-in from senior leaders and teachers to parents and pupil ambassadors; it is crucial that the whole-school community understands their part in demonstrating and developing empathy.

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