

*“Love one another, as I Have Loved You”:*

# 6 Tips for Teaching Children Empathy

■ by Jessica Parks, MSW, LCSW

***If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.***  
~ 1 Corinthians 12:26 ESV

Parents spend a great deal of time and energy teaching children the skills of living. We teach them to say “please” and “thank you,” we teach them to brush their teeth, we teach them to tie their shoes, to do their homework, to drive a car, to dress for a job interview. Throughout their lives, we are modeling and teaching countless skills. There is one skill that is necessary in every phase and every situation in human life, yet parents often overlook it or are unsure of how to teach it. That skill is EMPATHY, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. As 1 Corinthians 12:26 describes this skill, *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together* (ESV). Teaching children empathy results in their increased capacity to see the face of Christ in others. Children who cultivate the skill of empathy are more respectful, thoughtful, and kind. Empathetic children are less likely to bully. Empathetic children are less likely to tolerate bullying behavior in others.

## 6 Tips on How to Teach Your Children Empathy

How do we begin to teach this crucial skill? Here are some ideas:

### 1. Help children label their own emotions

If your child is crying, you might say, “I see you are feeling sad” while offering comfort. This prepares the way for your child to be able to see and understand their own and others’ emotions.

### 2. Play a game

Make a game out of making exaggerated facial expressions and having them guess what emotion you are feeling. Then have them try it and you guess!

### 3. Help them identify what they have in common with others

Kids often are curious about differences that they see (like when a friend uses a wheelchair or a stranger dresses differently than they are used to). Acknowledge these differences, and work with them to identify traits that they share (“Yes, she uses a wheelchair to get around. And I notice that she has a rocket ship on her backpack. I wonder if she likes science like you do?”). This helps them see that we share more than divides us as children of God.



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Article taken from the Sep | Oct 2017 issue of *PRESSING ON*, a Publication of Chicago Christian Counseling Center  
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## 4. Be a model

Model kindness and empathy in your behavior toward others. Children are always observing the adults around them.

## 5. Role Play

Run scenarios with them and ask how they think others may feel. You could do this with characters in books, in discussing their day at school, in watching the news, or in any other situation where you are discussing other people.

## 6. Empathy in our World

Help them “zoom out” from simply trying to understand the emotions of family and friends. Talk with them about people impacted by persecution, violence, etc. Encourage them to explore their own emotions about these things, then help them to think about the emotions those impacted may experience.

Empathy is an essential skill for living a life that embraces kindness, calls out and stands up to bullies, and connects with others. Through helping children develop capacity to understand and experience others’ emotions, you equip them to join the worthy calling to *do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8, NRSV). ■



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