

Building a Culture of Empathy in the Classroom

Helping Teachers Help Students to be Others Centred

I was visiting a school community at the end of last term and came head to head with a young person charging out the door. There was no stepping aside, no acknowledgment that I existed. It was the perfect demonstration of the concerns that the school wanted to address. How could they build a school community with empathy at its core?

The ability for our children to practice empathy is all around us and yet society tells us to be more and more egocentric and self-serving in the world. Examples of this abound, such as increased problems with children's behaviour with other students, impacts on teachers, mental health concerns and unresolved conflicts. Teachers experience parents who are unwilling to listen, take comments personally and behave badly. Systemic funding problems impact teachers as well. Sports coaches are abused by students and parents alike...the list goes on and on.

Research tells us that enhanced empathy skills lead to increased happiness and scholastic achievement.

The damage to children, who are unable to demonstrate empathy of others is troubling:

It is clear from the research that these children face the following risks:

1. Immediate gratification
2. Centre of the universe
3. Disrespectful of people and property
4. Not know how much is enough: food, drink, recreation, fun, work
5. Helpless
6. Confusing needs and wants
7. Overblown sense of entitlement
8. Poor boundaries
9. Irresponsible
10. Lacks skills
11. Poor self-control
12. Life goals are wealth, fame and image
13. Relationship problems

Clearly we don't wish this list of issues on any member of our community. The good thing is that we can take action to do something different.

What is Empathy?

According to Daniel Goleman, "Empathy means having the ability to sense others' feelings and how they see things. You take an active interest in their concerns. You pick up cues to what's being felt and thought. With empathy, you sense unspoken emotions. You listen attentively to understand the other person's point of view, the terms in which they think about what's going on." He goes on to discuss three kinds of empathy.

- 1. Cognitive Empathy:** This is the ability to see the world through another's eyes and being able to understand how another person might think, which allows us to understand how to best communicate with someone. It helps us to work with those who are different to us.
- 2. Emotional Empathy:** This allows us to feel as if we were the other person. We need to tune into our own feelings and notice our body's reaction. It is how we notice if we are in rapport and building a relationship or damaging it.
- 3. Empathetic Concern:** This is the demonstration of a person's concern of the other. In the classroom, this is about creating a safe learning space where students are supported to take risks and admit mistakes.

Goleman asks, "Which kind of empathy should a leader, a teacher or a parent have? All three." A teacher who possesses all three has the opportunity to model these skills for our children to learn.



Why is empathy important?

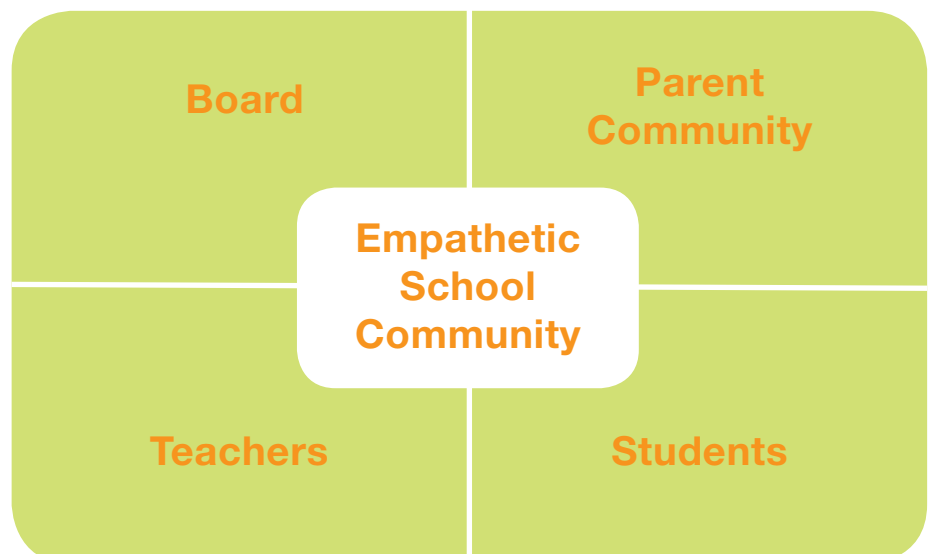
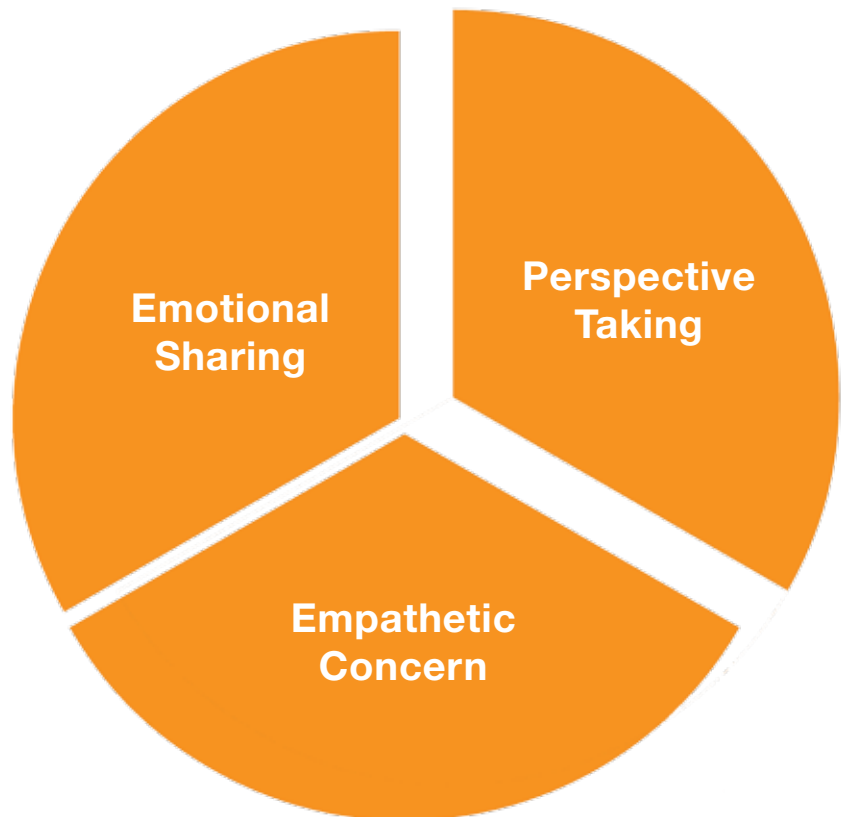
1. As social beings, humans need each other to survive, thus the importance of gaining the ability to read each other, truly understand each other and to understand how others might see you.
2. Empathy is good for being a team player in sports, for working together in the classroom, for being in a family. It is vital to have the ability to put yourself into another's shoes.
3. It helps you to better understand the nonverbal cues of communication.
4. It helps you to understand conflict and different ways of thinking.
5. It helps you to be able to influence and negotiate with others.
6. It makes you think more broadly about what is possible.

Fundamentally, empathy makes us human. Research tells us that enhanced empathy skills lead to increased happiness and scholastic achievement.

Building Empathy: Three Processes

1. **Emotional Sharing:** Recognising emotion and having language to name emotions.
2. **Empathic Concern:** The demonstration of concern for another person.
3. **Perspective Taking:** Being able to step outside one's own life and imagine what it is like for another.

I respect the needs and thoughts of others.



Support Across the School

Classroom behaviour at many levels can be driven from expectations of the wider school community. If we want to drive a greater demonstration of empathy, it is useful to consider the school as a system, including the hardware of the school, such as organisational structure, finances, infrastructure, buildings and spaces as well as the software of the school system, such as the mission, values, policies, practices and soft skills of people in the system.

- **The Board:** Direction is always led from the behaviour and expectations of those who lead. Leaders decide what is measured and what is reported on. How do the values of the school community become embedded in all the policies and practices of the Board? How does what is funded and supported reflect the mission and values of the Board? We want to be playing the long game of building competent and resilient citizens. What are the unintended consequences of the drive for excellence as the top value, the podium finish? We know that it results in pressure to exceed the last achievement and the ensuring impact of anxiety and growing mental health concerns in teachers and students alike.
- **Teachers:** As leaders in the classroom, what the great teachers do is to role model empathy for themselves, their colleagues and their students. Observing the daily practice of self-care, concern for others and managing vulnerability is the practical way children will learn.
- **Parents:** How parents raise concerns and interact with the school is also an opportunity to influence within the school. Being able to support them to step into the teacher's shoes for a moment is a challenge. Arrange opportunities for parents to do this.
- **School Community:** From the bus driver to the senior leaders, sports coaches to librarians, a consistent modelling of empathy (along-side boundary setting) is the way to build an empathetic culture.
- **Students:** Supporting children to grow their empathy skills is an every day, every moment teaching opportunity.


Strategies for the Classroom

- **Feeling of the Week:** Develop the language of feelings.
- Expecting children to notice and name empathy when demonstrated by others.
- Developing games that build skills to read faces and body postures.
- Fostering cognitive empathy through literature and role playing.
- Foster multiculturalism.
- Support children and the parent community to find what they have in common amongst all that is different.
- Have jobs for children to carry out in the classroom.
- Have rules of expected behaviour and politeness.
- Teach non-verbal cues.
- Report on empathy, persistence and delayed gratification in school reports.

Ideas for Changing Old Behaviours and Attitudes

Below are some practical ways that we can attempt to create new attitudes and behaviours in ourselves or others.

- Pick one attitude or behaviour to change at a time. Only one. Stay underwhelmed.
- List all the ways life would be better for this student, the classroom and for you, if you were to change that attitude or behaviour.
- List the disadvantages to changing. Everything from, "This student will throw more tantrums," to, "This student may not like me," to, "I've not a clue what to do instead."
- Make a decision to change.

- Describe your new attitude or behaviour by turning around the old one in words that make sense to you. "I allow my students to get away with things," might become, "I do not allow my student to get away with things," or, "I hold my students responsible for their behaviour." Say it aloud five times morning and night. Post it on the mirror, on the front of your computer screen and even in your wallet.
- In the morning, think of one little way to act on your new attitude, or decide on one small way to behave in a new way throughout the day. Be sure to do it!
- When you are ready, choose one big way to act on it each week and do it. Get help if you need it.
- If you fall back, congratulate yourself for being on the journey. No beating yourself up.
- When you notice a positive shift in the attitude and behaviour of yourself or a student, celebrate, but don't overindulge.
- Go back over the list and notice how many other ways things have changed in a positive way. Celebrate! 

Madeleine Taylor is a parent of three grown sons and works as a People Skills Consultant. Madeleine is an accomplished workshop facilitator and long-time trainer of negotiation, influencing skills and managing difficult conversations. Madeleine is a parent educator exploring how to grow resilient children in this complex world. More information can be found at www.peopleskillsconsulting.co.nz

Copyright of Teachers Matter is the property of Spectrum Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.