



WHAT IS EMPATHY?



Empathy is the ability to understand how another is feeling and even share in that feeling.

Why is it important to have empathy?

Empathy is the key to making and keeping connections with people. It's about linking two or more minds by recognising and respecting others' feelings and attitudes. It's likely to increase helping behaviours like sharing, comforting or showing concern. It can stop us embarrassing ourselves – or others. Think how a three-legged race goes much better when you and your partner can sense and communicate how to move and which way to turn.

What does it look, sound or feel like when someone has empathy?

Someone showing empathy might be said to “put themselves in another person's shoes”, “be in tune with them”, or “get inside their skin”. Empathy can take many forms. Sometimes we just feel it; sometimes we act on it. Here are some examples:

- A toddler tries to comfort someone who is crying by offering them a favourite toy.
- A pre-schooler sees a picture of her mother laughing or smiling and says “Mum is happy”.
- We squish over to make room on a bench so someone doesn't feel left out.
- We feel happy when our friend wins a prize.
- We understand how upset someone who is being bullied might feel, so we don't join in.
- We don't say loudly “Look - that lady is SO FAT” if we see a very large person on the street.
- We know why our little sister is both nervous and excited about starting school.
- We don't make a loud noise when we know someone is tired or upset.
- We understand why someone did something bad ... or had to do it in a certain way.
- A counsellor senses when a client's ready to talk about a hard topic, and when they're not.
- We understand the feelings of a person in a song, book or film – even if we don't like them.
- Someone says “I know how you feel ... I understand your frustration...” and really means it.
- We smile or wave at someone ... even if we don't know them.



It's easier – but not essential – to empathise if you've had a similar experience. Reading, different social contacts, or just taking time to think and talk about others helps us develop empathy. Empathetic people are often great negotiators, advisers, and listeners who show tact, compassion, kindness, consideration and good manners.

**Can you think of some other examples of showing or feeling empathy?
In which jobs or situations might having empathy be particularly important?**

REFERENCES

California Department of Education, 26 September 2016. “Foundation: Empathy”. Retrieved from: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/itf09socemofdemp.asp> 8 November 2017.

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