

10 Ways to Teach Empathy to Young Children by Using Dolls, Play and More

By leading empathy expert, writer and educational psychologist, Dr. Michele Borba

*Parents always ask me what matters for children's happiness, mental health and success, and my answer is always **empathy**. Empathy plays a key role in predicting kids' well-being, academic success, authentic happiness, relationship satisfaction, as well as their ability to have resilience and bounce back from adversity. It also promotes kindness, prosocial behaviors and moral courage and is an effective antidote to bullying, aggression and racism. Empathy prepares children for what lies ahead and can give them a huge advantage when it comes to their careers, helping them to live meaningful and productive lives in an ever-changing world.*

The latest scientific findings from Cardiff University and Barbie are extraordinary. The evidence from this research has shown that children can develop empathy and social information processing skills by playing with dolls like Barbie. As well as a remarkable finding for the scientific community, this is an incredibly helpful insight for parents to be able to help their children's development. Science tells us that we can nurture this immensely crucial trait in our children, starting when they are young. But I also know those findings come with a caveat: empathy will remain dormant if we don't intentionally put it in our parenting plans.

Empathy is like a muscle: the more children practice it the stronger it gets. And the best news is that there are simple yet meaningful ways to help our children learn to be kinder, caring and more empathetic. Here are ten science-backed tips to cultivate your child's empathy from my book, [UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World](#). The more we use them in our everyday parenting, the greater the odds that we will raise a strong and caring generation of children.

10 WAYS TO BOOST YOUR CHILD'S EMPATHY

1. **Encourage Free Play with Dolls and Listen In!**

Doll play offers a unique window into our children's lives. Tune in closer and you may discover your child's interests, worries and dislikes. Children often talk while they free play and you can encourage that by offering a variety of dolls that your child chooses. Doll play is a bridge to discovering who our children are, but there is only one rule: We must let our kids lead us.

2. **Talk Feelings!**

Children must be able to read emotions before they can empathize. Expand your child's "feeling vocabulary" gradually so he understands an array of feeling terms. Name feelings: "Looks like you're angry." "You seem frustrated. Ask feeling questions: "Are you tense – worried - happy?". Girls from a young age hear many more emotion words than boys do, so talk about emotions more with your sons and give them permission to show and convey their feelings.

3. **Broaden Horizons**

Did you know that it's easier to empathize with those "like us?" We should encourage our children to have contact with individuals of various races, cultures, ages, genders and abilities from an early age. One way to do this is by offering them a variety of dolls with different skin colors, genders or disabilities. And always help your children look for what they have in common with others, not how they differ. "There's lots of ways you're different from others, so let's think how they're like you. You both like soccer. What else?" Those simple chats are the perfect empathy lessons to help kids understand that differences shouldn't divide us; after all, we are all "us."

4. *Make Feeling Flash Cards*

Teaching children to 'read' feelings is a key step toward cultivating empathy and kindness. Print the names of a few basic emotion words like happy, sad, afraid, excited and surprised—on index cards. Then draw or glue pictures from magazines to depict each emotion onto the corresponding paper. This is also a great way to ask your child if they ever experienced the emotion. And turn the flash cards into a game: each family member pulls a card and acts it out using only his face and body to depict the feeling with no sounds or words allowed. The goal is to guess the person's emotion, increase empathy and enjoy one another's company.

5. *Use the Two Kind Rule*

Try the Two Kind Rule: "We say or do at least two kind things to each day." First, talk about what kindness looks like (such as saying hello, smiling, sharing a toy, or helping someone). Point out kind acts whenever someone displays them. Acknowledge your child's kind act: "Holding your brother's hand to help him down the stairs was kind." Encourage the rule as your child plays with dolls: "Teach Max the Two Kind Rule." "Chelsea looks lonely: how can Kelly help?" The more kids practice kindness and we as parents acknowledge and celebrate it, the more their empathy will grow.

6. *Let Kids Care for Another*

Children learn to empathize by taking care of another. So, look for opportunities that are age appropriate where your child can comfort and help like feeding the family pet, calling lonely Aunt Sally, or delivering cookies to an inbound neighbor. Young children can also act out caring with dolls. For instance: A nurse doll checks a doll patients' vital signs. A park ranger doll protects animals. An animal rescuer doll feeds and provides shelter to help injured animals recover. The more they practice kindness during play, the likelier children will use kindness in real life.

7. *Praise with Nouns*

If you've ever wondered whether your praise nurtures empathy, an experiment with three- to six-year-olds offers clues. Children were first encouraged to help as a verb ("Will you help?"). Another group was asked to help with nouns: ("Will you be a *helper*?"). Young children encouraged to be "helpers" (nouns) were far more likely to do so. If you want your child to see himself as a caring person, use nouns! "Thank you for being kind." "I love when you are thoughtful." And whenever possible, describe the impact of the caring gesture to your child: "Grandma was so happy when you called to thank her," "Did you see Sarah's smile when you shared your toys?" "Kevin looked so pleased when you asked him to play."

8. *Start a Kindness Box*

An old shoebox with a slit cut in the top will do for this simple activity to increase kindness in your family. Just encourage your family to look for others doing kind acts at home or beyond. Whenever kindness is discovered, the "Kindness Finder" writes or draws the deed and the family member's name and slips it in the Kindness Box. Reading those notes during your family meal or family gathering helps children look for the good in one another and kindness grows.

9. *Playout acts of kindness and empathy*

Playing with dolls is not only fun but also a proven way young child can learn empathy. Asking the right questions helps you discover what's going on in your child's mind. "What's happening?" "What makes her happy?" "What does he do if her friend is sad? Encourage your child to practice kind, caring and helping acts as they play with gentle prompts. "Daisy can't find her guitar. How can Barbie help?" "Ned looks lonely and left out. What would you want someone to say if you were lonely? What can Ted do?" Once kids realize how to comfort, help and care, the more likely they will be kind and empathetic.

10. *Use Dolls, Babies, and Puppies to Teach Empathy*

Give children responsibilities to take care of others. Encourage your children to comfort and soothe their dolls or stuffed animals while they play. You can also use actual babies, pets, or siblings to help your child learn kindness and practice prosocial skills. "Watch how the Mommy holds her baby. How can you hold Baby Doll so he feels loved?" "Fido looks frightened. How can you help your puppy feel safe?" Younger sibling: "Sister seems worried. How can you help?" The more children practice kindness, the more likely they will internalize the value.