



Teaching Empathy to Young Adolescents

by Scott Tyink

FOR MIDDLE LEVEL

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch teaches his daughter, Scout, empathy. After a series of baffling conflicts with people from all walks of life leaves her unsettled and angry, Atticus firmly but lovingly calls on Scout to try to see the world from other people's points of view:

"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-"

"Sir?"

"-until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Development and empathy

This is well-tempered, timeless advice. But for middle school teachers, increasing students' capacity for empathy is complicated by the fact that most young adolescents experience an extended "inward" period of development, in which individual identity is an important-at times, paramount-focus. Often lost in the storm of adolescent social-emotional growth, students don't think much about how others feel. How can we help our **middle-schoolers** navigate through this self-centered storm toward a more empathic way of being? Here are some practical ideas to try.

1. Acknowledgements

Notice empathetic behavior when it happens. Too often, we notice and respond to rule-breaking behavior but forget to acknowledge the good things that happen. Be on the lookout for empathetic behavior, and honor it in a public way when you see it.

For example, when Shelly's pen runs out of ink and Larry lends her one of his, mention it: "Larry, you loaned Shelly a pen, so we'll all be able to continue our writing assignment. Thanks!" Or, you could bring your school's group agreements (Social Contract) into the equation: "One of the rules in our Social Contract says, support others. Thanks for honoring our agreements, Larry."

Acknowledgments ideas for closing activities

Popcorn: anyone calls out an acknowledgment to anyone else, without raising hands or taking turns. This version takes away some of the embarrassment in giving and receiving an acknowledgment by de-emphasizing each particular compliment. It generates a general feeling of well-being in the group.

Written acknowledgments: students describe in writing times when they saw other students acting with empathy.

Acts of kindness: students acknowledge each other for actions of empathy they witnessed that day. For example, "Davon was empathetic when he picked up my binder for me after I dropped it."

2. The Talk Show Game

Materials: None

How to play: Group students in pairs.

In each pair, one plays the role of a talk-show host. The other plays the role of the guest on the show. Present each pair with a scenario that involves empathy or lack of empathy. The goal is for the host to elicit an empathetic response by drawing ideas from the guest about some of the experiences, feelings, and attitudes associated with that scenario. The host interviews the guest for one to two minutes, and then the leader gives a 30-second warning.

After the time expires, call for a break, and invite players to stop, switch roles, and take up a new scenario. The process is repeated: the new roles and topic are used within a one- to two-minute time frame. After both students in each pair have played both roles, give the students a few minutes to reflect with each other about the exercise.

Possible scenarios for pairs:

- A student does not do well on a test.
- A girl who heard some gossip appears upset.
- A rumor about you is spreading around the school.
- You were in a fight with your best friend at lunch today.
- You liked your new shoes when you put them on this morning, but somebody made fun of them.
- You thought you would make the basketball team, but you got cut.

Plan for Success: It is the guest who is practicing empathy by imagining himself or herself in the specific situation and trying to identify what it would feel like. The host should not give advice, but should try to ask questions that assist the guest in getting in touch with what it might be like to be involved in the given scenario. Hosts can ask questions which probe the details of a feeling.

Because this is a challenging line of questioning, in the beginning interviews will likely be short, composed of perhaps 4 or 5 questions. As students' skills grow, extend the questioning period.

Encourage the hosts not to use "why" questions during the interview process. Often when we ask others to explain why they feel a certain way, we are asking them to rationalize a non-rational experience. This can be confusing and may not forward the empathic experience.

Provide specific scenarios, not abstract generalizations. Before playing, model the game with a student, and ask the rest of the class to watch and listen carefully. Play the role of the host, and model asking questions that clarify what the scenario is and lead the guest to his or her own understanding of what someone might feel in this situation.

Interview example

Scenario: a student does not do well on a test.

Host: How do you feel about your grade on the test?

Guest: I am disappointed and mad at myself.

Host: What grade did you hope to receive?

Guest: At least a C.

Host: How does it feel when you're mad? What happens inside you?

Guest: I get tense and crabby. Right now, I can't think about anything but that test.

Host: Have you felt this way before?

Guest: Yes-every time I get a bad grade.

Host: What do you say to yourself or think about yourself?

3. Empathic Language

The language of empathy moves away from making judgments and toward describing things accurately. Here is another exercise in which students take on roles and respond from different viewpoints to given social scenarios.

Tell the students that you will leave the classroom and then come back. Their job is to closely observe your behavior. Leave, then walk back into the classroom and make several mistakes in the process: talk loudly, eat some food without permission, take somebody's pencil without asking, etc.

Tell students to write down on a notecard what they noticed. Collect the cards, and read them aloud. As students listen, ask them to signal one way when they hear descriptive language, and another way when they hear judgmental language. Follow this by providing a quick definition: empathetic language is descriptive, not judgmental.

Four steps of empathetic language

Teach students the following sequence of descriptive, non-judgmental (empathetic) language:

1. I saw . . . (describe what happened)
2. I felt . . .(describe how you felt when you saw what you saw)
3. I need . . . (describe what you need/would like)
4. I request . . .(make a request for the future)

Example of using the four steps

Exclusion-a student is left out of a party

1. "You didn't invite me to your party." (statement is a description, not a judgment)
2. "I felt upset. I thought we were friends."
3. "I need to know if you're mad at me."
4. "Next time, will you let me know when you're mad?"

The fourth step is especially challenging because it requires students to identify and express a need through a specific request. Initially, teachers may decide to leave it out. On the other hand, it models ideal behavior, even though it may seem unlikely that students will be able to achieve that level of civility at this time

Practicing

Use drama scenarios to practice the language of empathy in social situations students are likely to encounter. Describe the situation (do not act out the negative behaviors) and then have students try it

using the four steps of empathetic language in response to the situation (this is the part to act out). You can use the following ideas or provide your own examples, and then ask students to brainstorm a list of scenarios.

- One student is left out of a soccer game at recess.
- Two girls are gossiping about a third girl as she unexpectedly passes, overhearing them.
- A student is repeatedly asked to share his homework with friends, even though the work is supposed to be done independently.
- A student is being pressured to join a gang.
- A boy with poor social skills tends to ostracize himself from the group with awkward, annoying, or slightly antisocial behavior. The group wants to help, but isn't sure how.

4. Games that Teach Empathy

These games may be played during an advisory/homeroom CPR meeting or throughout the day:

[Knots](#) or [Group Juggle](#)

Knots

Community Level 3 - Comfortable

Materials: Small lengths of rope or stretchy cloth (optional)

How to Play: Divide students into groups of four to six players. Players stand in a circle. They place their right arms into the circle and grab a hand across from them. Each player does the same thing with his left arm. (Each player should now have two different players' hands.) Now all the players are connected in a big knot that they must untangle without letting go of their partners' hands. The group discusses and strategizes different possible ways of untying the knot.

Plan for Success: The closeness of this game requires a lot of trust. Discuss how this game could help support cooperation, assertion, and responsibility. See variation below for a lower-risk version of the game.

Variations: Use pieces of cloth (stretchy is fun) to reduce proximity and touching. This variation introduces Knots with a lower risk factor and allows for larger groups.

Group Juggle

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Community Level 1 - Acquainted

Materials: 3 to 6 balls or beanbags

How to Play: Players stand in a circle and one player begins by throwing the ball to another, who throws it to another and so on, until each player has received the ball once, and the player who started receives the ball at the end of the round.

Plan for Success: Model and practice how to throw the ball or beanbag quickly and with control.

Variations: Groups can try to do this as fast as possible and keep records on their best time. Brainstorm ways to improve the time and continue trying. When the group has mastered group juggling with one ball, introduce more balls into the game, so that it really becomes a group juggle with a number of balls in the air simultaneously.

5. Simple musical performances

Musician, author, and Professor Daniel Levitin believes that performing music together is one of the best ways to build people's capacity for empathy. The act itself demands caring relations among the players as well as other empathetic behaviors, such as listening to others, taking turns in the spotlight, playing a supportive role, paying attention to dynamics, and being prepared. Even if your classroom isn't filled with students receiving formal musical training, casual musical performances can easily be orchestrated in any middle school classroom. Consider the following possibilities.

- Rhythmic call-and-response exercises can be done in advisory/homeroom meetings or as energizers or closing activities throughout the day. In a circle, let each student do what she can within four beats; the audience repeats each person's rhythm back to her before the next student shares his.
- Rhythms can be added, one at a time (each student repeating his four beat phrase, again and again), creating layers of rhythmic complexity. Start by having one student lay down a simple, even, four-beat phrase, either vocally or by snapping fingers, or clapping, or a combination. The second student adds hers as the first student begins a new 4-beat phrase, and so on, until each student is contributing to the sound. When each student starts, he/she must continue his/her phrase, supporting those who follow, and must not change until everyone has joined in.

6. Sharing in the Circle of Power and Respect

Sharing during advisory/homeroom CPR can be a great time to build empathy. Try **whip shares**, where each person in the circle gives a one-word response to a question. Afterwards, invite students to ask follow-up questions. With the right topic, the empathy in your room will be palpable!

Examples of whip-share topics that can build empathy:

A pet you've known has passed away

A painful trip to the dentist's or orthodontist's office

A time you were ill or hurt

An experience with baby siblings or other baby relatives

An experience with puppies, kittens, and other baby animals

A time when you felt left out

An embarrassing moment

Getting cut from a team

Losing an election

Examples of follow-up questions about a time when you were sick or hurt: "Monroe, how did you get help after you fell?" "Dede, how long were you out of school, and what did you do during that time?"

7. Buddy classes

Create and maintain a relationship with another class (preferably younger students). There are many activities you can use that facilitate empathetic behavior:

- Read together
- Play board games
- Do a combined class meetings
- Older students plan a party for the younger students
- Do a service project together
- Do an art project together
- Study vocabulary words together

8. Young People's Books

Read and discuss books with explicit themes of empathy, such as:

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

Smokey Night by Eve Bunting

Uncle Jed's Barbershop by Margaree King-Mitchell

Abuela's Weave by Enrique Sanchez

Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen

Stellaluna by Jannell Cannon

Weave these ways of building empathy into the class period on any day, in any week. Some become classroom routines, such as acknowledgments. Others are special activities that work well in advisory, such as practicing empathetic language or playing a game. The idea is to consistently infuse your time with students with opportunities to think about others from a fresh, sympathetic point of view.

The PAYOFF

The payoff for teaching empathy is the creation of school communities strengthened by trust and free from constant strife-the kind of social-emotional climate that translates into higher academic performance for everyone.

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