

5 Ways to Foster and Teach Empathy to Children

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Three years ago, I wrote an article about fostering empathy for children with disabilities that I thought would be helpful for parents of young disabled children. At the time, my three boys were 10, 8 and 7. I got such a nice response from the piece I updated it based on my children's current ages of 13, 11 and 10 as well as added some new things I continue to learn along the way. Since I frequently tell my children that everyone in life faces challenges, some of us on the outside, others economic or emotional, this list really attempts to speak to parents of children of all backgrounds. While schools grapple with teaching children about bullying, parents should and can take an active part in helping children develop empathy. My children had a very rare medical condition called facial paralysis which made it vital for me become their ongoing advocate.

Here are my five ways to foster and teach empathy that have helped us:

1) Empathy vs. Sympathy

This is a lesson that never goes out of style in our home but our approach has clearly changed as our kids have gotten older. The way I explain the difference to my children is that sympathy is feeling sorry for someone, empathy is understanding their struggle. No small task.

To that end, rather than just educating people about our circumstances, we are now trying to reach out and understand other people's challenges as a means of giving our children a keen understanding of how they are indeed part of a world so much bigger than themselves. Leading by example is the best gift we can give them. Obvious? Yes, and no. In our case, just because our children have a disability doesn't mean you automatically are empathic. In fact, you can easily isolate yourself and feel detached from the outside world. Depression and adversity often go hand in hand.

We try to teach our kids about the numerous benefits of service, giving back and selflessness. We expose them to children and families who are developmentally, economically or physically challenged. We invite these people into our lives both in big or

small ways through friendship or volunteering. We try to make it part of our everyday lives, not a lecture. You've heard of "just do it." Just live it.

2) Communication is the Key

Many disabled, disadvantaged and special needs children are pre-judged because of a lack of communication about the child. Even though my children have been at our school since pre K, we continue to educate teachers and parents, every year, about their medical history. It's not my favorite thing to do but it has to be done and we keep at it. If you have a child who has been diagnosed with a learning disability at 8 or 9 for instance, this might be new territory for you. Get out in front of it. Ask your child to come with you to meet the teacher or administrator so that you can truly collaborate on their education. New friend, coach or babysitter? No activity worth doing isn't worth explaining. Are you a single parent and can't be at every school activity, identify a surrogate — another parent or friend who can fill in for you when necessary.

Recently, I thought a teacher/coach knew my child was hearing impaired, he did not. When my son took his hearing aids off for sports, he could not hear the coach half of the time and the coach thought he wasn't paying attention. After we realized what was happening, we explained to my son that he needed to watch the coach for visual direction and to the coach that waving and making eye contact on his end allowed my son to read lips. Small adjustment, big benefit.

3) Visit the Classroom, Playing Field or Playmate's Home

Kindergarten is the age I chose to first talk to my son's class about our children's disability and every year that followed until 5th grade when I did it more one on one with the teacher so as not to embarrass my child. No matter what challenges you are facing, I encourage you to share your story, engage the people in your child's life. It took us a lot to overcome our discomfort with telling people our personal information but once the story was out, it was incredibly liberating and heart warming to see how people surround you and support you.

4) It's Not About You, It's About Them

Make friends with the parents of your child's classmates or in your neighbourhood or church or local Y. These do not necessarily have to be people you would choose to be besties with but if it helps your child, do it. If you are reserved and not normally outgoing,

work on it, overcome it. I'm not kidding. As your child grows up it will be vital to your marriage, your life and your child's self-esteem that they have friends within the community. I speak and write about parenting frequently, and overwhelmingly, this is the number one obstacle for people and yet, when you find young people who love and support your child it is also the most rewarding. Maybe your child is incapable of having a peer-to-peer relationship with a child their age, it does not mean they are incapable of receiving love no matter what age or ability. Of course, you will have to start by going back to point #3 and share your story. Then get out there and make friends.

5) Be Happy #triggerhappiness

Five years ago, I had just gone through two major surgeries with my oldest child and I took the kids on a much-needed vacation but still I could not relax. The stares of strangers followed us everywhere. Before my husband joined us halfway through the trip, we spent long days together, swimming, eating and playing but rather than enjoy it, I cried by myself every single day feeling sorry for our circumstances. One day I looked up and the boys were laughing and playing and not caring or understanding one bit about the curve balls life had thrown us. I decided right then and there to take back my life, our life, love our life. It's not all rainbows and butterflies, there are still plenty of tears, but there are much more ice cream cones, singing at the top of our lungs and belly laughs. Eliminate the negative, all of it. Surround yourself with stable, kind people, they are out there. Give yourself a break, walk barefoot in the sand, trigger your own happiness and theirs will follow. It will build self-esteem and give them a lifetime of love. We all know someone who seems happy all the time, how is that possible?