

WHAT DANISH PARENTS KNOW ABOUT TEACHING EMPATHY

WRITTEN BY KATIE HINTZ-ZAMBRANO
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PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES KICINSKI-MCCOY

We all want our kids to be happy. And happiness is something the Danes have supposedly figured out, with research consistently showing that residents of Denmark are among the happiest in the world. So, it's not a huge surprise that an article we published on [Danish parenting tips](#) has proved to be one of our most-read. Due to this popularity, we decided to do a deep-dive into some of the bigger philosophies rooted in Danish culture with *The Danish Way of Parenting* authors Jessica Alexander and psychotherapist Iben Sandahl leading the way. Last month we discussed [the power of play-based parenting](#), and this time around we're talking to the authors about the Danes' belief in the importance of teaching children the concept of empathy.

Tell us how you define empathy.

“Empathy is the ability to recognize another’s emotions or more simply put—being able to walk a mile in someone else’s

shoes. America is much more individual based. Being a winner and striving to be the best are very normal goals for us. This equates to success and I don't think we really question it. It is just part of our culture. Winning means a lot. Perhaps one of the major differences between Denmark and America is that Danes value teamwork much more than striving to be a star. And with that, they actively teach empathy."

How does practicing empathy connect to overall happiness?

"All the latest neurological research shows that humans get more happiness from cooperating with others than from winning alone. Scientists have discovered 'the social brain,' which lights up to show that we are driven by something beyond self-interest: We are driven towards social connectedness. Caring relationships are one of the biggest predictors of happiness, well above money. It used to be believed that humans were innately selfish, but that is simply not true. We are all wired for empathy from birth. We just have to learn how to connect the wires to make it work. Being able to better trust and understand others are keys to achieving more happiness. And kids can be taught this."

How do Danish parents teach this?

"The Danes teach empathy in schools, which is quite special. Empathy is such a big concept and it is taught in so many different ways for different ages. Three examples would be language choice, letting children self-regulate, and reading a wide range of stories."

Tell us about that first concept: Using language choice to teach empathy.

"The first thing that is crucial to remember when teaching empathy is that our children are mirroring us. The kind of language we use is so important. How do you describe others? Are you understanding or judgmental? Tolerant or shaming? These are all things children are copying. Talking badly about others in front of kids and saying things like 'She is mean,' 'He is selfish,' 'She is so annoying' is not empathic language because it isn't recognizing the emotions behind the action—it's labeling. In Denmark, you almost never hear parents talking negatively about other children in front of their children. They are always trying to find ways to get their children to understand another child's behavior without a negative label. If you remember that all children are fundamentally good and there is a reason behind all behaviors, this helps us naturally find the good in others. This makes us feel better because it teaches 'reframing'—another *Danish Way* concept that improves happiness. We can help our children find the reasons behind the labels 'He is annoying? Do you think maybe he is hungry? Or could he be tired because he missed his nap? You know how it feels to be hungry and tired, right?' 'She is mean? It sounds like she had a bad day at school. The other day you said she was sweet. She is actually sweet, right?' Helping children understand the feelings behind behaviors and leading them to a kinder conclusion is teaching empathy. It operates on the same neural pathway as forgiveness and it fosters more trust, cooperation, and a much better sibling relationship if you have more than one child. And don't forget that parents have to have empathy for themselves sometimes, too. Parenting is hard and we don't always get it right and that's ok. Being understanding and forgiving of ourselves makes us better at forgiving our children and others."

Explain the concept of self-regulation.

“Before we can be good at recognizing the emotions of others, we have to be able to understand our own emotions. Parents sometimes tell children what they think they should or shouldn’t feel. They override them. If they are sad, angry, hungry, cold, or upset, some parents tell them ‘No, you aren’t,’ ‘Don’t be sad,’ ‘You have no reason to be angry,’ ‘You should be hungry, eat!’ Telling children how they should feel is not letting them learn to self-regulate their own feelings. As parents, we have to give our children trust so that they can learn about their own emotional boundaries. This builds a stronger sense of self, which is paramount to self-esteem down the road. When they are older they will be less afraid to say ‘no’ when their boundaries are pushed because they will trust themselves to make the right decision based on what they feel. This is such an important lesson to teach children. We can help them with the language use, but we need to trust them so they can trust themselves. Remember, there are no good or bad emotions. There are just emotions.”

Finally, what kind of stories can we read our children to help teach empathy?

“Read all kinds of stories to children, not only happy ones. Talking about difficult emotions in books can be a fantastic way to build empathy. Many Danish children’s books are shocking by American standards with the topics they cover, but studies have shown that reading about all emotions increases a child’s ability to empathize. The original *Little Mermaid*, which is a Danish story, doesn’t get the prince in the end, but rather dies of sadness and turns into sea foam. That opens up quite a different kind of discussion! But it is incredible how receptive children are. They want to talk about all kinds of things. It seems to be more difficult for adults sometimes than for children. Remember, they are mirroring our discomfort. If we talk about life’s peaks and valleys in a non-dramatic way, our children will be more resilient in the long run. Books are a great way to teach empathy.”

For more Danish parenting advice, read [our original article](#), our follow-up on [the power of play](#), and scoop up [*The Danish Way Of Parenting: A Guide To Raising The Happiest Kids in the World*](#). You can also visit Alexander’s [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).