

Teaching your child how to be empathetic

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Children often are surrounded by people who are different from themselves, especially at school, and it is important that they treat others with respect and empathy, regardless of their differences. Although empathy can be a hard quality for parents to teach, a Baylor College of

Medicine expert gives his advice on how they can do this.

"It is important to understand the human plight and what others are going through. Empathy is a core element to meaningfully relating to other human beings," said Dr. Eric Storch, professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. "Having [empathy](#) is part of a foundation of treating others with respect, kindness and thoughtfulness."

His tips include:

Put yourself in others' shoes

When [children](#) are younger, Storch recommends that [parents](#) have their children think about different situations they may encounter and then conceptualize how they would feel or think if they were in the other person's place. For example, if they bring up that a new student has started at their school, a parent could ask how their child would feel if they were the new student.

"Essentially, you are helping your child see that there is more than meets the eye in terms of overt behavior. There is usually an underlying cause as to why the other child is acting a certain way," Storch said.

Allow do-overs and model behavior

Another way of teaching empathy is to allow kids to have do-overs, Storch said. Many times kids will react in a way that afterward they may want to rethink or perhaps was not how they intended to react. By giving them the chance to go through these situations again, they learn how to react the next time a similar situation occurs.

It also is important for parents to give their kids opportunities to be empathetic in order to reinforce this behavior. For example, doing age appropriate volunteer work or community service activities can be a great way for children to learn empathy because they are actively doing something to help someone else.

Read

Reading books and telling stories can be great ways of conveying different values to children as well, he said. Using stories can help kids frame what their values are and what they may do in different situations.

Encourage face-to-face interaction

Storch added that limiting the use of social media and instead encouraging kids to focus on interpersonal interactions is a good way to help them develop a sense of empathy and social relatedness to others. Qualities like empathy are harder to learn if a child or adolescent is not having face-to-face interactions with others.

"As kids continue on through adolescence and into adulthood, it is always important to encourage discussions about how to value the perspectives and feelings of others," Storch said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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