

Developing Empathic Skills for Parents and Teachers

A problem shared is a problem halved. You don't need formal training to develop empathy, and you don't have to understand everything about the people who are talking to you, for them to feel listened to. Start off by listening to members of your family, friends and colleagues.

Facial Expressions

Focus on their facial expressions to begin with. Look at presenters and their guests on *BBC 1 Breakfast* and *ITV Good Morning Britain*. Both have good examples of facial expressions, and it's likely they will all be displaying one of the faces listed below.



These faces are universal which means that all cultures experience them in the same way. Please note that a surprise can be experienced both as a nasty shock or a pleasant surprise. Once you have mastered what type of facial expressions are being used, then concentrate on your own body language, and that of your respondent.

Body Language

Get rid of all distractions, i.e., your mobile. Your body language is important in creating a feeling of empathy because it is a significant part of the communication process. Face the person, make eye contact (don't stare), uncross your arms and lean forward to show you are interested. A good listener will nod, smile and give feedback such as "Mm hum", "Yeah" "I see" or "No, really?" in a sincere way to encourage the respondent to continue.

Observe the respondent's body language such as, their eyes and posture. Are their eyes darting around the room or looking down, then this can indicate a reluctance to talk? Their body posture influences, thoughts, which influence feelings. Is their body posture upright which conveys a feeling of confidence or it is slouched which may mean that the person is feeling indifferent, anxious or bored.

Does their skin colour change, i.e., they might be embarrassed? Does their rate of breathing stay the same or does it go up and down? If their breathing fluctuates this can indicate that the person is having an anxiety attack.

Tone of Voice

Their voice tone can give important clues about how they are feeling inside. A person's voice tone often tells us more about the real meaning than the words people choose. High, fast voices sound frightened, while low, slow voices sound calmer and more confident.

Stay in the Here-and-Now

Ask them how they feel and how was their day. I recommend you concentrate on the here-and-now of the experience that is going on between you and the respondent you are engaging with. This means that the discussion should stay in the present, and not bring up the past (*'You've said you've done this before'*), or the future (*'If you repeat what you have just done then that will create chaos'*) unless they tell you differently. The italic comments are unhelpful and will steer you away from what the respondent is trying to explain. Use open-ended questions like. how come? when? and what? This will require more thought than a simple yes, no or don't know answer.

Practice Active Listening

If you can learn to achieve 'active listening' this means that you can demonstrate concern for the respondent, you are talking to. Go beyond the small talk and ask them how they are and what's going on in their daily lives. Try not to interrupt them when they are speaking and practise 'paraphrasing' (rephrasing a sentence) which is an empathic skill to facilitate a discussion, for example:

Family member: *'All my friends have read horrible things that people say about me on Facebook and I don't think I can go back on there.'*

Try not to paraphrase like a parrot – e.g.

You: *'Your friends have read horrible things about you, and you can't go back there.'*

Instead use responses like:

You: *'It seems you might be frightened to go back on Facebook. What's the worst thing that can happen to you if you decide to go back on it?'*

The first sentence is to acknowledge feelings, while the second sentence opens the discussion up further. Responding to a statement using open-ended questions like how come? when? and what? will require more thought than a simple yes or no answer and they will invariably elaborate. Having developed some of these skills you will then feel a sense of instantly envisioning yourself in the other person's place and feel concerned for what they are going through.

Reflecting Back Feelings

If you want to reflect (to check out) their feelings, you can say *'That sounds pretty scary to me I just wondered how you feel about it.'* Don't worry if you get it wrong as most people will correct you by saying, *'No it's not too bad, I feel angry/ sad/shocked.'*

Examine your Biases

We all have biases but sometimes we are not always aware of what they are. Look for opportunities to mix with different people from diverse cultures and listen to what they have to say about their values and beliefs. Remember to remain impartial to what is being said and how it is being said, and don't make speculations.

Further Development

I realise that if you are listening to a young person, you may feel the need to offer advice which it is OK to build into the conversation. It may seem that there's a lot to take in, however, I would encourage you to practice one of the skills at a time until you feel confident in putting them all together.

The website below has further guidance to develop empathic skills:

<https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>