



Chapter 9 Empathetic

Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6:1-14 CEB)

After this Jesus went across the Galilee Sea (that is, the Tiberias Sea). A large crowd followed him, because they had seen the miraculous signs he had done among the sick. Jesus went up a mountain and sat there with his disciples. It was nearly time for Passover, the Jewish festival.

Jesus looked up and saw the large crowd coming toward him. He asked Philip, "Where will we buy food to feed these people?" Jesus said this to test him, for he already knew what he was going to do.

Philip replied, "More than a half year's salary worth of food wouldn't be enough for each person to have even a little bit."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?"

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass there. They sat down, about five thousand of them. Then Jesus took the bread. When he had given thanks, he distributed it to those who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, each getting as much as they wanted. When they had plenty to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces, so that nothing will be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves that had been left over by those who had eaten.

When the people saw that he had done a miraculous sign, they said, "This is truly the prophet who is coming into the world."

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Rowan is in the habit of waking up every morning at 5:30 to get into bed with us for early-morning cuddles. His two-and-a-half-year-old body squirms up to mine and he twirls my hair while I scratch his back. He has recently begun bringing a Disney's Rapunzel doll to our morning cuddle session. He squirms next to me and while I hold him, he holds his baby. He soothes her with back scratches while I play with his hair.

This model of caretaking—soothing another when they're sleepy—is a form of empathy: being sensitive to another's thoughts, feelings, and needs without the other explicitly communicating them. It's incredible to watch his empathy take shape in the wee hours of the morning with his baby doll. He perceives that she must need back scratches since it's early in the morning, and that's what he needs early in the morning.

He has learned enough about what he needs, and enough about his feelings, that he is able to apply that knowledge to his baby doll. This ability to understand another is imperative for living in a community, whether that community is a family unit, a sports team, a faith community, or a neighborhood of folks. Without the ability to understand what is going on for the people around us, we're unable to exhibit any of the traits I've laid out in previous chapters.

But is empathy biblical and important enough to be on this list?

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus models empathy for everyone around him. It's how Jesus moves through the world—looking for opportunities to understand people and care for them through his compassion. His lived experiences help him be present with and open to others. I believe it's Jesus' empathy that led to the many healing miracles he performed.

When Bartimaeus, a man born blind, calls out to Jesus, Jesus listens instead of ignoring him like the rest of the crowd. By being present with Bartimaeus, Jesus is able to ask what he needs. From Jesus' empathy comes his compassion and the miracle: Bartimaeus asks to see and Jesus restores his eyesight.

Another time, Jesus is walking through a crowd, and a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus' clothes. Immediately her bleeding stops and she is healed. But Jesus can tell that someone has touched him and that some of his power had gone out from him. He is sure of it and wants to know who touched him. The woman comes forward and tells him her story. He could have been angry—she did touch him without asking—but he isn't. Instead, he tells her that her faith has healed her and to go in peace. I believe it's because he listened to her story and had a better understanding of why she touched him. Through her story, he was able to empathize with her and give her the blessing she needed.

Then there is the time when Jesus is walking through a village and ten men with a skin disease approach him. The passage says that Jesus sees the men. In his seeing, Jesus offers them healing from their skin disease, and the men are allowed to rejoin their families and communities. Jesus recognizes that the men's isolation from their community must be lonely, and from that place of understanding—from a place of empathy—he offers healing.

Empathy is a requirement for relationships. If you've been in a relationship where a conflict has occurred, you have probably experienced the need to understand what the other person is feeling and thinking in order to move toward reconciliation. Since compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and generosity are markers of a good person, empathy must also be an important character trait. Empathy is required for all of these qualities to be put into action.

Empathy is the catalyst for making the world a better place. Empathy leads to compassion and action—action that is connected to the real needs of the people we seek to serve and love.

But how do we teach our children how to be empathetic?

Since empathy has two parts—emotional empathy and cognitive empathy¹—our children need to have opportunities to feel their feelings, identify what those are, and understand why they are feeling them (I am still working on this at 35, so it takes time to build empathy muscles!). This gives them the knowledge base to pull from when they encounter others' emotions and stories, which helps them understand what another person is experiencing and offer care in appropriate ways.

Learn emotions

Social-emotional learning is a key part of learning how to empathize. When kids are able to notice their feelings and how they express them, they are able to recognize those feelings in others. If a child is able to recognize what causes a feeling to come up for them, they are able to apply those findings to another person. For example, if Rowan learns that he gets angry when our dog, Charlie, takes his cheese, he can surmise that a friend would get angry at him if he took their food. This is empathy in action!

Our job is to help our children build their knowledge about emotions. Since emotions exist to help us understand our human experience, none of them are good or bad. Some feelings are more comfortable than others, but no emotion is bad. In my experience, when I try to not feel something (usually sadness), it comes out anyway—in the form of migraine or in passive-aggressive behaviors. That's more uncomfortable than just admitting I feel sad and letting myself feel the weight of that feeling.

¹ "The Psychology of Emotional and Cognitive Empathy" <https://lesley.edu/article/the-psychology-of-emotional-and-cognitive-empathy>

Since I want Rowan to know what he feels, I like to practice labelling his feelings with him in the moment. He is a super happy kid (I am very lucky in this way), but when he gets frustrated, he is FRUSTRATED. He gets pouty and mad, and sometimes will tell me, “I can’t do it!” even when I know he can. So I say, “Rowan, you are frustrated that you didn’t get your shorts on by yourself the first time you tried. When you’re frustrated, you think you can’t do something, and that makes you mad!” This helps him understand what he’s feeling and why. He’s frustrated because he thinks he can’t do something. I get frustrated when I think I can’t do something, too.

Practice labelling your child’s emotions. You can start with simple observations: “You are happy” or “You seem sad.” Once you’ve gotten comfortable labeling the emotions, include what’s going on in their bodies: “You are happy and I can tell because you are smiling.” This helps them connect what they feel and how it’s expressed in themselves. Then, you can start telling the stories of their feelings like I did with Rowan—he feels frustrated when he thinks he can’t do something he wants to do.

Another way to help your child learn emotions is through playing a game! Take turns making different facial expressions. The other person guesses what feeling that facial expression is. So if I smile, Rowan would guess “happy” and be right. It’s really fun and can be so funny to see how our kids mirror our facial expressions.

Read books

A great way to build empathy is through reading books. When we read, our brains and bodies believe that what is happening in the story is happening to us!² When we experience what is happening to another person—even to a fictional character—we are building our empathy muscles. Reading helps us better understand the people around us and increases our bank of experiences to draw upon when we are relating to another.

2 “Your Brain on Books: 10 Things That Happen to Our Minds When We Read” <https://oedb.org/librarian/your-brain-on-books-10-things-that-happen-to-our-minds-when-we-read/>

Here are a few books that I recommend:

In My Heart: A Book of Feelings by Jo Witek

Rainbow Shopping by Qing Zhuang

Beneath by Cori Doerrfeld

Judy Moody by Megan McDonald

Magic Tree House Series by Mary Pope Osborne

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson by Bette Bao Lord

Serve together at church

Another way to build empathy is through service. Meeting people who have different life experiences from our own helps deepen our well of understanding and builds bridges between people who may have never come in contact otherwise. The next time your church has an opportunity for your family to serve, sign up. Be open to having conversations with people you may have never met before, and let curiosity guide you.³

Empathize with your child

Your child will learn the importance of empathy by experiencing being empathized with. When we exhibit a deep understanding of our child's experience, they learn how good it feels to be seen and cared for in that way. They are also given a model of how empathy looks when it is put into practice. When we are able to recognize our child's emotions, sit in those emotions with them, and move toward a better understanding of what is going on for our child, we build stronger connections and compassion for each other.

If we want to empathize well with our kids, we must learn how to sit with our own emotions. Many of us were taught that some feelings were unacceptable to feel or show. I grew up believing that anger was an unacceptable feeling for girls to experience and that showing anger made you scary and mean. I spent a lot of years denying my anger and what my anger could teach me about myself. That made it very difficult for me to be around anyone else who was experiencing and expressing anger. It scared me and

³ "VOLUNTEERING AND ITS EFFECTS ON EMPATHY" <https://borgenproject.org/volunteering/>

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would lead me to sever relationships. It wasn't until I learned how to accept that I get angry that I was able to be with others who were feeling angry.

Be curious about the stories you learn about feelings! You may realize a feeling your child has that irritates you is a feeling that you deny in yourself. Ask yourself why it irritates you so much. You may uncover that it is a feeling you had learned was unacceptable—even though there are no unacceptable feelings.

A note: Just because all feelings are welcome does not mean that all behaviors because of feelings are welcome. Our behaviors should come from places of compassion, and when they don't, we must make amends for the harm we caused.

Conclusion

I love seeing how Rowan is already learning how to empathize and offer care to his doll. He also shows empathy to me. Just today, he saw that I was feeling sad, and walked over and gave me a big hug. His gesture of care helped me feel seen, loved, and valued. Rowan will continue to deepen his empathy, and he's already doing so well! Look for moments when you see your child empathizing with others. Tell them how proud you are of the ways they care for others. Encourage them to be proud of themselves too.