

Parents Help Students Grow: Empathy

Before school started in a message to teachers, I listed ways for teachers to demonstrate empathy. Empathy is defined as the ability to experience the same emotion someone else is feeling. Teachers rely on their ability to empathize with students and parents as a key component in helping to build strong relationships and helping children learn. Not only should teachers demonstrate empathy but so too should students. However, children must learn to be empathetic. Teachers help students “grow empathy”; so do parents and so they should.

Paul Eggen and Don Kauchak in their seventh edition of *Educational Psychology*, published in 2007, illustrate how important it is for our students to learn to be empathetic to others as a part of their moral development. A key to this emotional growth is the input and opportunities parents provide when they are with their children before and after school.

The authors of the text describe a poignant scene between mother and daughter that occurs when the child comes home from school. When Melissa comes home from school, her mother detects that there is something wrong. Melissa relates that she insulted Jessica in school when Jessica gave an answer that was way off the mark during a group activity. Melissa said, “That’s dumb. Where did that come from . . .?” Melissa told her mom that Jessica did not say another word for the remainder of the class and was upset. Melissa told her mom that she felt really bad about what she said and knew how upset she would feel if someone said that to her. Because Melissa shared the story with her mom and demonstrated empathy, her mom provided this advice: “I know you did not mean to hurt her feelings. Go to her first thing tomorrow and tell her you’re very sorry, and that it won’t happen again.” Melissa told her mom that she would do so and that she felt better for sharing the story with her mom.

For student growth, this story is significant in several ways. First, Melissa demonstrates empathy—she knew how Jessica felt and would not want someone to say that to her. Second, Melissa’s emotional intelligence is enhanced and strengthened through this episode. Third, Melissa’s emotional and moral development is enhanced through her mother’s involvement. Fourth, Melissa’s apology helps Jessica’s self esteem get a boost. Jessica was a victim of a putdown that on a continued basis would turn into bullying. Fifth, the relationship between Melissa and her mother was extremely important. Their relationship provided an opportunity for Melissa to share a behavior that made her feel shame and guilt, which also chipped away at Melissa’s self concept. Behavioral scientists agree that “experiencing shame and guilt indicates that moral development is advancing and future behaviors will improve.”

In conclusion, when children can share what happens at school—good and bad—with their parents or guardians, many positive outcomes will result. In the story, that simple exchange between mother and daughter (1) helped one girl continue to grow emotionally and morally, (2) helped another girl not become a victim of bullying behavior, (3) demonstrated to both girls that we all make mistakes and can fix them, and (4) underscored the need for children and parents to find the time to talk about what happens in school. – Dr. Novey