

exploring empathy's role in promoting positive social change



Creating a world free of violence means we're collectively striving to promote the humanity of each individual person, as well as make sure systems recognize the full humanity of those individuals. One tool we have available is **empathy**. Empathy is an important component of advocating for all survivors of sexual violence. Advocates, counselors, and first responders seek to support and respect all survivors, regardless of their background, and develop their empathy "muscles" to be as effective as possible. In addition to being a part of responding to sexual violence, empathy can play a significant role in prevention. Building empathy in childhood can be a way to buffer negative attitudes early, encourage respect, and may help decrease levels of violence.

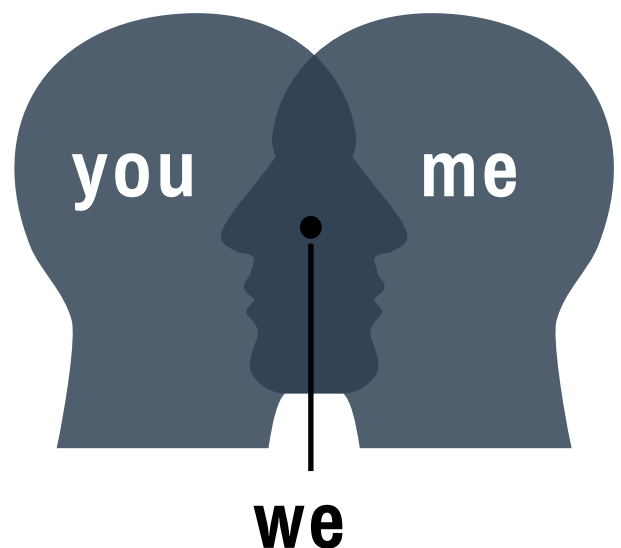
WHAT IS EMPATHY?

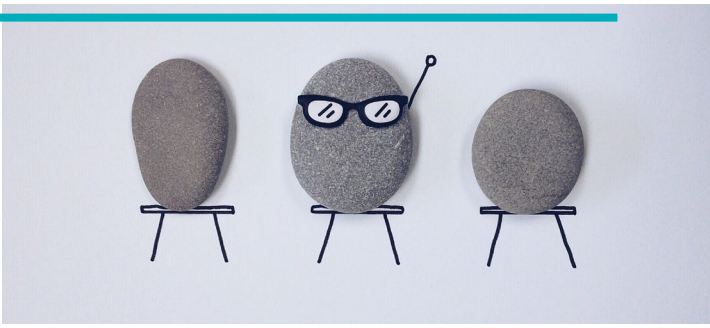
Empathy has often been understood or referred to as "the ability to feel or imagine another person's emotional experience."¹ It has been studied in terms of our evolutionary development and our desire to be close to others. Empathy can also come with the belief that everyone has inherent worth and is worthy of respect and compassion. Studies have shown that empathic behavior can be identified in children as early as 18 – 72 hours after birth. Many researchers believe empathy can be encouraged, built upon, and practiced in early life, modeled and supported by caring adults.²

A common framework explains empathy as comprised of two key aspects: *cognitive empathy* and *affective (emotional) empathy*.

▶ empathy:

the ability to feel or imagine another person's emotional experience.





Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's experience(s) and state of mind. It also involves the ability to predict how a person may respond in a situation. This aspect of empathy is sometimes referred to as the "theory of mind." Cognitive empathy is the intellectual understanding of another's emotions, even if you are not experiencing them directly.

Affective empathy, also called emotional empathy, focuses on the process of vicariously experiencing another person's emotions. Affective empathy can be

an effect or result of cognitive empathy, but can be experienced on its own. This is primarily an automatic emotional response.³

These two aspects work together to build a robust, empathic experience. They provide an individual the ability to understand what a person is thinking *and* to feel the emotions that person is experiencing. While both aspects can be valuable independently, the combination of the two is more likely to produce more positive results overall.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF BUILDING EMPATHY

We can support and encourage empathic behaviors early and throughout all stages of life. Empathy deficits have been linked to permissive attitudes toward violence or violent behaviors themselves,⁴ while the presence and support of developing empathy has been linked to many pro-social outcomes. Empathic behaviors can help foster a safer academic environment; higher levels of empathy have been linked to higher grade-point averages (GPAs), critical thinking skills, and overall higher scores within educational systems.⁵

Additionally, some studies found that empathy has positive outcomes for physiological and neurological aspects. Many studies found that those with higher levels of empathy often have better physical and mental health overall. A study of pediatric cancer cases found that parents or caregivers who exhibited higher levels of empathy toward their children during treatment resulted in the patient feeling less physical pain. High empathy levels have also been linked to lower feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and stress, and also reduce likelihood of participating in health risk behaviors such as drinking or smoking.⁶

Perspective-taking offers us a practical exercise in building empathy. At a basic level, one can imagine themselves in another's situation and anticipate how they would feel if they were in that situation. At a higher level, perspective-taking can involve placing oneself in another's situation while imagining *the other person's* thoughts and emotions in that situation, and how they may differ from their own.⁷ Building empathy and encouraging the development of perspective-taking can be valuable in sexual violence prevention. As mentioned, the development of empathy can help diminish the likelihood of perpetration, perhaps due to the perspective-taking ability that empathy provides. This can allow someone to take another's emotions into consideration before acting, and an overall increase in caring and compassion for others.

Additionally, empathy can help foster healthy relationships in adolescence and through adulthood. Particularly in romantic relationships, individuals who engage in perspective-taking and overall empathy for one's partner report having higher satisfaction in adult relationships.⁸ This can promote a healthy, respectful, and communicative relationship between

intimate partners. In fact, the presence of empathy has shown to mitigate the likelihood of perpetrating sexual violence, especially within intimate partner relationships.⁹

Empathy can also promote more accepting and respectful attitudes toward individuals who have a different gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic level, ability level, religion, etc. This can be important in sexual violence prevention, particularly in attempts to uproot oppression, the force that perpetuates rape culture.¹⁰ Respecting other people who come from different backgrounds can decrease violence, negative attitudes, and aggression toward groups of people who have historically been marginalized. This can help mitigate power imbalances and biases.

Not only can empathy help combat oppression, research has shown that empathy training at a young



Building empathy and **encouraging** the development of **perspective-taking** can be valuable in **sexual violence** prevention.

age can help decrease the gap in empathy levels between boys/men and girls/women.¹¹ Traditional gender roles devalue stereotypically feminine attributes, and empathy is often considered to be a feminine trait. Men who embrace hypermasculine behaviors suppress intimacy and emotional connection with others, which reduces their capacity for empathy and increases their likelihood of perpetrating violence and endorsing rape myths.¹² This can ultimately contribute to oppression. Supporting empathy training in early life for *all* genders can help reduce the assumption and stereotype that empathy is only a feminine attribute.



BUILDING EMPATHY EARLY

Supporting a solid foundation for empathy and respect will have a lasting impact into adolescence and adulthood. Incorporating empathy and empathy training into prevention programming and youth activities – regardless of age – will further strengthen the effectiveness of the content. Empathy training can be practiced and incorporated throughout all stages of growth and development.

- **Model empathy:** As caring adults, we can set the example by modeling empathy in the presence of children. Research has shown that when caregivers promote empathic behavior, children are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors and attitudes.¹³ *Active listening* is a great way to model empathic behavior. Practicing this skill can help listeners better understand others'

perspectives while making the speaker feel heard and respected.

- **Discuss emotions:** Caregivers can encourage children to discuss and identify *all* emotions—both positive and “negative.” Emphasize that there are no *bad* emotions, but rather there is an appropriate way to respond to those emotions. This can help children learn how to cope with emotions in healthy, productive ways. Additionally, not only has emotional literacy been linked to an increase in empathy development, but understanding one’s own emotions can in turn help them understand how another person may be feeling.¹⁴
- **Role-playing:** Children can practice assuming the role of a real or fictional character, and act out that character’s feelings and emotions in

varying situations. Increases in empathy have been identified when children have the ability to put themselves in another person's shoes.¹⁵ Ongoing practice in perspective-taking can help support the development of empathy and the ease of understanding another's point of view. This can also be an opportunity to encourage the child to be proactive in creating safer spaces for themselves and their peers. For example, "Imagine you saw a classmate being picked on during recess. How would you feel? What can you do to make that classmate feel better?"



- **Encourage participation in extracurricular activities:** Studies have shown that children who play music together and/or participate in a school band or musical group are more likely to be attuned to others emotionally. Playing games that require interaction with others can have a similar effect—they require the individual to put themselves in their opponent's shoes to determine their intentions.¹⁶ Participating in group sports has also been linked to character-building and social cohesion among teammates.¹⁷
- **Promoting good nature:** Caregivers can encourage positive traits in children by expressing the innate good nature of that child. For example, "I liked how you naturally thought of what your friend might need when they were sad the other day." Linking prosocial behavior to who they are as a person can promote the ongoing development of empathy.



PREVENTIONISTS & ADVOCATES: HOW WE CAN HELP

Professionals and volunteers in the sexual violence prevention movement may come in contact with caregivers and caring adults who interact with children on a regular basis. It is important to support prevention and help prepare adults to have conversations early in life by focusing on building the skill of empathy.

- **Linking:** Empathy training can be built into life skill education as children grow. Teaching young children empathy is an important skill that builds a solid foundation for prosocial behaviors throughout life.

- **Reading:** Fiction allows the reader to fully understand a character's inner thoughts and feelings, and studies have suggested that reading fiction can have positive effects on empathy levels. Encourage caregivers and adults to support fiction reading that explores a variety of different characters and emotions.
- **Resources:** Connecting adults to resources can further their education on how to encourage and support empathy development in children.

RESOURCES¹⁹

Books—

As mentioned, reading fiction can increase levels of empathy with children and even adults. Listed below are some pieces of fiction appropriate for children and aim to positively affect empathy levels in children:

Just Because by Amber Housey

Stand In My Shoes by Bob Sornson Ph.D.

The Name Jar by Yanksook Choi

One by Kathryn Otoshi

Tough Guys Have Feelings Too by Keith Negley

The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss

Zen Ties by Jon J. Muth

Sam and the Lucky Money by Karen Chinn

Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla
by Katherine Applegate

Additional resources—

[Making Caring Common](#) (MCC) is a project out of Harvard University to support educators, parents, guardians, and communities in raising more empathic children and communities.

[Greater Good in Action](#), created by the Berkeley University of California's Greater Good Science Center in collaboration with HopeLab, uses science-based practices to promote healthy and positive living. Their website includes tools on how to build empathy.

[Common Sense Media](#) is a nonprofit organization that aims to support children in the 21st century world of media and technology. They provide parents and caregivers with resources to assist with making smart media choices.

[Me by TinyBop](#) is an Apple smartphone or tablet application for children ages 4+ created to help children identify and express their emotions in a virtual safe place.



REFERENCES

- McDonald, N. M., & Messinger, D. S. (2011). The development of empathy: How, when, and why. In Juan José Sanguinetti, Ariberto Acerbi, José Angel Lombo (Eds.), *Moral Behavior and Free Will: A Neurobiological and Philosophical Approach*, 341-368. If Press.
 - Cotton, K. (1992). Developing empathy in children and youth. *Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory*. Retrieved from <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/developing-empathy-in-children-and-youth.pdf>
 - Zoll, C. & Enz, S. (2010 October). A Questionnaire to Assess Affective and Cognitive Empathy in Children. *Personality and Individual Differences*, (49/5), 362-367.
 - Tharp, A. T., DeGue, S., Valle, L. A., Brookmeyer, K. A., Massetti, G. M., & Matjasko, J. L. (2013). A systematic qualitative review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, (14/2), 133-167.
 - Cotton, 1992.
 - Konrath, S. & Grynberg, D. (2013). The Positive (and Negative) Psychology of Empathy. *The Neurobiology and Psychology of Empathy*, Nova Science Publishers, Inc. Retrieved from: https://www.ipearlaboratory.org/media/publications/Konrath_Grynberg_2013.pdf
 - Barnett G.D. & Mann R.E. (2013). Cognition, Empathy, and Sexual Offending. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, (12/1), 22-33.
 - McDonald et al., 2011.
 - Tharp et al., 2013.
 - Tharp et al., 2013.
 - Cotton, 1992.
 - Lisak, D. & Ivan, C. (1995). Deficits in intimacy and empathy in sexually aggressive men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, (10/3), 296-308.
 - Cotton, 1992.
 - Cotton, 1992.
 - Cotton, 1992.
 - Kennelly, S. (2012, June 8). Does Playing Music Boost Kids' Empathy? [Web log]. Retrieved from http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_playing_music_boost_kids_empathy
 - Donnelly, P. & Coakley, J. (2002). The Role of Recreation in Promoting Social Inclusion. *The Laidlaw Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://app.box.com/shared/kx6ngir9vp7ymnxj145x>
 - Paul, A.M. (2010, March 17). Your Brain on Fiction. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- ¹⁹ The inclusion of all resources referenced or listed in this document should not be interpreted as an endorsement. NJCASA includes available research- and evidence-based practices as examples of how theory is operationalized and/or incorporated into practice.

Front page graphic adapted from: <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/empathic-design-is-empathy-the-ux-holy-grail>

© New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault 2017.

The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) is the statewide organization representing 21 county-based rape crisis centers and Rutgers University's Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance. NJCASA elevates the voice of survivors and service providers through advocacy, training, and support for efforts to create safer communities for all women, men and children.

njcoalition
against sexual assault