



Let's Hear It for Empathy!

“Learning to stand in someone else’s shoes, to see through their eyes, that’s how peace begins. And it’s up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.”

Barack Obama



Heather Clayton is the author of *Making the Standards Come Alive!* and is the principal of Mendon Center Elementary School in Pittsford Central School District, New York. She is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More* published by Just ASK.

In order to be successful with academic standards, students need social-emotional skills. Research tells us that the process of learning is 50% cognitive and 50% social-emotional. An unwrapping of standards across disciplines K-12 reveals that social-emotional learning is implicitly embedded in the academic work of students. For instance, in English Language arts our students are asked to consider multiple perspectives and cultures, engage in collaborative discussions with diverse partners, communicate effectively, and demonstrate a social awareness. Similarly, in social studies, students are making global connections, studying diversity, and exploring relationships. The Standards for Mathematical Practices are

all built on social-emotional learning and emphasize important skills like perseverance in problem solving, critiquing the reasoning of others, and constructing viable arguments.

In other words, to meet the standards our students need to possess skills in the emotional arena. We can't teach our disciplines and content in silos, nor can we leave social-emotional learning out of the equation. Our children need to know how to work together, make a difference in the lives of others, and be good citizens. What will get us there is **empathy**. We can turn empathy into action and teach our students the important skills they need to effectively contribute in our global society.

Empathy

Empathy is simply seeing the world through another person's eyes. When we show empathy we understand the perspectives of others and are able to sense other people's emotions. We can understand what another person is feeling even if we haven't had the same direct experience. We are empathetic when we suspend judgment and open ourselves to others outside of our social circle, including those from different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds.

When we show empathy we are kind and compassionate.

Empathetic people actively listen to others, not to fix but to feel. They are able to walk in someone else's shoes and communicate in a way that says "I understand." Our students that show empathy are peaceful problem solvers and team players. They are supportive of others and possess a courage to stand up for what is right. Empathy is at the heart of caring actions in our world.

According to Dr. Michele Borba, Ed.D, in her book *Unselfie*, with technology we have a significant decrease in face-to-face

communication. Empathy skills are down 40% while narcissism rates are up 58%. Our world has become increasingly

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impersonal and our best chance to combat cruelty and bullying is to promote awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to others.

Dr. Borba also tells us “Empathy is what lays the foundation for helping children live one essential truth: We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns, and deserve to be treated with dignity.” Our world is increasingly globalized, and our students need to know how to effectively interact and communicate with people from different backgrounds that hold different beliefs than they do. Our children are born with

the wiring to exercise empathy, but without explicitly teaching and nurturing empathy, it won’t develop on its own. Empathy consists of teachable habits that have the potential to change the learning landscape for our students.

In classrooms where empathy is cultivated, students trust one another, have positive relationships, and understand each other’s perspectives. They are free to focus on learning in an environment where it is safe to take risks.

Strategies for Teaching Empathy

Model empathy

As educators it is important that we are empathetic towards our students. If we aren’t empathetic, we cannot understand the diverse students we serve. Also, by demonstrating empathy we serve as models for our students. Here are some ways to model empathy in the classroom:

- **Let every student’s voice be heard**
The perspectives and ideas of each child in the classroom should be recognized and valued. We ultimately want to have a group of students who are interdependent and collectively assume responsibility for their learning, the success of their discussions, and the treatment of their classmates.
- **Celebrate positive, empathic responses**
When a student demonstrates empathy, it is worthy of celebration. If a teacher hears students speaking to one another in a way that shows understanding and kindness, it is important to notice and name what the student has done. By providing this reinforcement, teachers will see empathy grow.
- **Demonstrate empathy in every interaction**
Teachers can show their students respect by making eye contact, keeping uncomfortable conversations private, and consistently using word and actions that demonstrate they care.
- **Know your students**
One of the best ways to model empathy skills is to know your students well; know their passions, fears, strengths, and dreams. Encourage them to share about themselves and soak in all they have to tell you.

Create a safe and caring learning environment

Every student in the classroom should be valued and respected. Educators need to set the expectation that all students are a part of a community and that they are responsible for acting in a way that is inclusive, caring, and open. Teachers should set classroom norms, or a create a classroom compact, that outlines how everyone in the classroom will treat each another across the entire day. If a student notices a classmate is struggling or isolated, it is important to make a personal connection and help build them up.

Give students tools to recognize their own emotions and feelings

Students will not be able to show empathy until they can recognize their own feelings. The best way to help them with this is to provide them with an emotional vocabulary. A robust feeling vocabulary can help our students discriminate between feelings, better communicate with others, and engage in conversations about the impact of those feelings and how to manage them.

“If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from his angle as well as your own.”

- Henry Ford



Helping a student to name their feelings is not a strategy reserved just for our youngest learners. As students develop, their feelings change and become more multi-faceted and complicated. A writer's notebook can be a great place to exercise reflection around feelings and think about how our feelings impact our decisions and actions. An example of this would be having students write a feeling at the top of a blank page in their notebook, then list times they were feeling that way. For each event they list, they should also reflect on how their feelings impacted their decisions and actions.

Feeling: Overwhelmed	
Times I felt this way	How it impacted me
When my research report was due in three days and I hadn't even started.	The worry I had was with me in every part of my day. I found it hard to be nice to my friends and family and until I actually got started on my writing, there was no relief.
Performing for a large audience during my wind ensemble concert.	My confidence was shaken when I saw how many people were in the audience. My reed seemed to dry out and I feared I wouldn't be able to make a sound. I felt paralyzed.

Other "Feeling" Words			
annoyed	brave	disgusted	relieved
anxious	confident	frustrated	thoughtful
awful	confused	guilty	unafraid
bored	cruel	jealous	worried

“Teachers can work to cultivate empathy less through WHAT they teach than by HOW they teach. Empathy can only be acquired over time, through modeling and experience.”

- Dr. Michele Borba

Teach the language of empathy

Similar to providing students with an emotional vocabulary, students need to have language that they can access when they are no longer reflecting on their own feelings, but on those of others. Our students need to learn the skills of actively listening to others during face-to-face conversations. Listed below are some sentence starters that can be used to teach students how to respond to others empathetically:

- If I'm understanding you correctly...
- I can hear how _____ you are feeling.
- It sounds like you're feeling _____ because...
- I am sensing that ...
- From where you stand it seems...
- What you're saying is...
- I can see how important this is to you because...
- I am thankful you shared this with me even though it was difficult for you.
- Your face seems to say...



Strategies for Teaching Empathy

Model empathy

Create a safe and caring learning environment

Give students tools to recognize their own emotions and feelings

Teach the language of empathy

Discuss literature

Reading literary, character-driven fiction to students is a powerful way to build community in the classroom. It is a time that students of diverse backgrounds can come together to create a shared experience around the text. When the classroom environment is a safe place, students can see themselves in books or learn to understand a character completely unlike them. The setting, characters, and conflict can give students a window into situations they have not yet experienced. It is an opportunity to step into another person's shoes and carefully examine the motives, decisions, and actions of characters. Shared text experiences give each student access to the discussions.

When reading texts that will cultivate empathy, it is important to set the purpose for reading. Students should be asked to notice a character's actions, infer their feelings, and try to understand the decisions they make. It is also an opportunity for students to make connections to times they may have had similar experiences. When readers transfer the events of fiction into real-world situations they are using the same psychological processes they use in real life relationships.

Some open ended questions to use when reading to cultivate empathy:

- Do the characters seem believable? Can you relate to the challenges the characters are having?
- Do any of the characters remind you of yourself or someone you know?
- How do the characters develop and change throughout the story? What events cause the changes?
- If you were in the same situation as _____, how would you react?
- Have any of the events from the story happened to you? How did you handle it?
- Who is your favorite character in the book? Why is he/she your favorite?
- Can you relate to the main character in the story? Why or why not?
- If you were in the story, what would your relationship be with the main character?
- Would you have done the same thing as _____ when _____?
- Which character do you feel you know the best? Why?
- What do you wish you could ask the main character? Why?

Reading literary fiction puts students in a place where they are challenged to imagine what the characters may be thinking. Literary fiction centers on the internal story; the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of the characters which makes it great for discussions about empathy.

Raise awareness of global issues

Sharing age appropriate information about real world issues can provide invaluable lessons on empathy. Students become empowered to stand up for people being treated unfairly, and they learn that even the smallest gestures make a big difference. When our students think about the hardships of others, it boosts their level of compassion and empathy.

A way to shine a spotlight on issues plaguing our world is through the use of classroom news magazines. We have to be extremely careful as educators that what we put in front of our children has journalistic integrity and sits in the middle of issues.

Some vetted and high quality resources to use with students to raise their awareness of important global issues are provided below.

Time for Kids

www.timeforkids.com/

A current events classroom magazine for grades 1-6 whose mission is to “Engage. Empower. Inspire. Authentic journalism to motivate curious minds.” (Elementary)



More Strategies for Teaching Empathy

Discuss literature

Raise awareness
of global issues

Promote
kindness

Provide
opportunities for
altruism

Scholastic News

<https://scholasticnews.scholastic.com/>

A current events classroom news magazine for grades 1-6.

Scholastic Kid Reporters: News for Kids, by Kids

<http://kpcnotebook.scholastic.com/>

The Scholastic News Kids Press Corps is student reporters from ages 10-14 from around the world. These student reporters cover breaking news, sports and entertainment from their hometowns.

An excellent example of a “kid reporter” article good for teaching empathy; “A Teen’s Experience” in Puerto Rico is found at <http://kpcnotebook.scholastic.com/post/teen-s-experience-puerto-rico>.

News ELA

<https://newsela.com/text-sets/#/tag/a-mile-in-our-shoes?tag=a-mile-in-our-shoes>

This link takes you to **News ELA** where there is a text set entitled “A Mile in our Shoes.” News ELA is an instructional content platform that includes a variety of engaging individual texts, text sets, assessments, annotations, and writing prompts for grades 2-12.

NY Times Upfront Magazine

<https://upfront.scholastic.com/>

The New York Times Upfront Magazine is a current events magazine for grades 9-12. It includes a number of national and international articles on current events and history appropriate for secondary students. Each publication also includes a regular feature about ethics.

NY Times Text to Text Pairings

www.nytimes.com/spotlight/learning-text-to-text

This link takes you to lesson plans and paired texts from the *NY Times*. The lessons explore diverse topics that are great for teaching empathy.

https://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/10/26/learning/lesson-plans/text-to-text-colin-kaepernicks-national-anthem-protest-and-frederick-douglass-what-to-the-slave-is-the-4th-of-july.html?_r=0&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fm.facebook.com%2F

This link is an example of a *NY Times* lesson using paired texts that addresses the NFL kneeling controversy and protest with a speech by Frederick Douglass.

NEWseum

<https://newseumed.org/>

NEWseum Ed provides online resources to support students as they learn to authenticate, analyze, and evaluate information from a variety of sources and a variety of historical contexts and current events.

Promote kindness

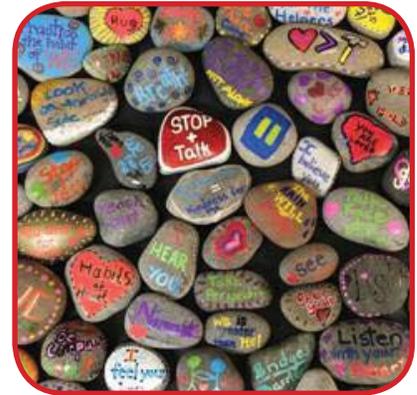
There are many kindness movements happening across the world. Getting your students involved in one of these movements can be empowering and go a long way for teaching empathy.

<http://thekindnessrocksproject.com/>

The Kindness Rocks Project, which recognizes the importance of random acts of kindness, strives to make a difference in the world “one rock at a time.” At Mendon Center Elementary in Pittsford, New York, we have been a part of the kindness rocks movement. This year,



our staff each created rocks of empathy to highlight what we know to be important when practicing and living empathy. Some examples of our rocks can be seen below:



www.randomactsofkindness.org/

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation is a not for profit organization that believes in spreading kindness in schools, communities, and homes. Here you can find free K-12 lesson plans for educators, along with kindness projects and strategies to form a kindness club.

Provide opportunities for altruism

When our students are altruistic they are selfless and have concern for the well-being of others. This awareness of the plight of others compels students to be empathetic and make things right. Altruistic children feel the pain of others and strive for solutions and a way to help. In her book, Dr. Borba calls these “helping muscles.” This giving is not for reward or personal gain, but rather makes students feel happier and healthier. She calls these students our “changemakers,” the ones who yearn to make a difference.

Our children need to know that they only need to reach one to make a difference. Focusing on one is manageable and achievable, and students are more likely to act than if they are focusing on a larger group that seems unreachable. It’s easy to make a difference, we just need to show our children how.

If a cause is meaningful to a student, they are likely to work hard to make a difference. Students should begin by thinking about feasible ideas then think through a plan to achieve their goals. Students could collect items for those less fortunate, donate their time helping others, create cards or artwork to share with others, or in lieu of birthday gifts, ask for donations to a cause.

Journaling

Reflection is a powerful tool for developing empathy. Teaching our students to reflect on their choices or actions and the impact on others creates an awareness that leads to empathy. Some educators have great success using reflective journals with their students where they write on prompts related to empathy. Here are some easy to use questions to get started:

- How did you show kindness today?
- What is something new you learned from a classmate today?
- Who had a hard time today? Why do you think that is?
- What is an important face to face conversation you had today? Why was it important?
- What could you do to help someone at school? Who would you help and why?
- How would it feel if someone called you names and picked on you?
- How would you feel if you saw someone calling a classmate names and picking on her?

Children who are empathetic...

Recognize feelings of others

Have a moral identity

Have a moral imagination

Take perspective of others

Self-Regulate
Practice Kindness

Collaborate

Possess moral courage

Make a difference

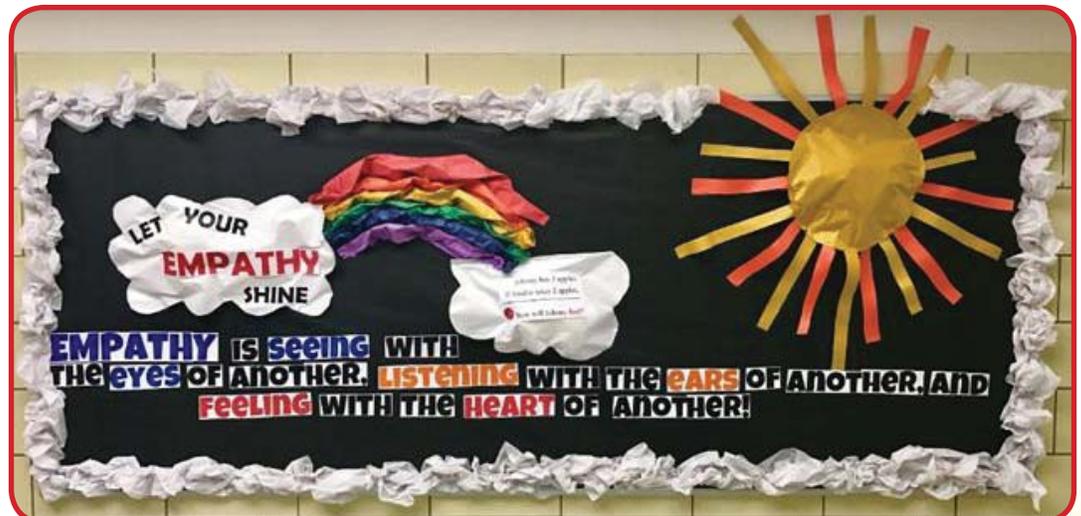


- What would it be like if you didn't have a safe place to live?
- When have you seen social media be helpful? When have you seen it be destructive?
- What would you do if you found out a classmate didn't have food to eat at home?

Like everything else, empathy requires practice. It's not about one great lesson or a visiting guest speaker. Getting to a place where our students are living empathetically requires slow and steady hard work, but it's possible. There is no shortage of places that classrooms, schools, and districts can look for inspiration. For instance, Dr. Luvelle Brown, Superintendent of Ithaca City Schools, New York, has led remarkable change in his district. Dr. Brown has courageously created a "culture of love" in the district and views all of the work with students through the lens of a kind and unselfish culture, where students learn from each other, learn the importance of face-to-face communication, and have quality relationships with staff. This focus on connections has eliminated in school suspensions for Ithaca's middle and high school students, and has dramatically increased graduation rates and achievement results.

Cultivating empathy is the right work for our schools given the world we live in today. Our students will have greater academic success, confidence, self-worth and happiness when they practice and live empathetically.

Students at Mendon Center Elementary, Pittsford Central School District, New York, focus on ways to build each other up and respect other's point of view. Picture are on the right.





Just ASK consultants are ready to help you develop new or refine old units to align with the your state standards and district curriculum. For more information, contact us at www.justaskpublications.com.



Additional Resources for Cultivating Empathy

Borba, Michele, Ed.D. *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. New York: Touchstone, 2016.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVTiplEG91s

A thought provoking Tedx Talk by Dr. Michele Borba entitled “Empathy is a VERB.”

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw

Brene Brown’s short video discusses the differences between empathy and sympathy.

<http://empathylibrary.com/>

The **Empathy Library** is a digital treasure house of inspiring books and films designed to spark a global empathy revolution.

www.common sense media.org/lists/books-that-teach-empathy

A list of great books for teaching empathy. The books listed celebrate friendship, differences, caring, and kindness.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>

The Making Caring Common (MCC) Project from the Harvard Graduate School of Education is committed to raising children who are “caring, responsible to their communities, and committed to justice.” The site includes lessons and resources.

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