

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING EMPATHY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS



Teaching with CLASS® Podcast
Season 2 Episode 8
Guest: Joanna Parker

Key Take Aways

The power of how you are: The little interactions and moments you might not even be aware of have such strong messages. They support key social-emotional skills that are ultimately tied to children's cognitive development, language development, and overall well-being. It's the little moments that matter. **Be present and be kind.**

+ 3 Strategies To Foster Empathy In The Classroom

- **Positive Climate:** be in tune with children, respect children's emotions and needs, support friendship skills, and create a sense of belonging and community.
- **Teacher Sensitivity:** be responsive to children, narrate what children are feeling (emotional literacy), and explicitly individualize.
- **Regard:** child focus and choice, provide opportunities for independence and autonomy, promote a feeling of being capable and competent.

Here are some ways empathy begins to appear in early childhood years

+ Infants:

- **Attachment:** As human beings, we are programmed to connect with others. Infants seek out adults to care for them and meet their needs, and we support developing those skills by fostering those early attachment relationships.
- **Reactions:** Much of an infant's capacity to build relationships and connect with others is shaped by the interactions they have with caregivers.
- **Responsive Caregiving:** When an infant cries, is tired or is hungry, being responsive sends a powerful message. It communicates that the world is a safe place and that they can rely on you to meet their needs. This responsiveness is a key part of building empathy.
- **Strategies to Try:** If you are busy with others in your classroom, verbally acknowledging a baby that is in distress or telling the infant about what is going on in the world around them helps to support social and emotional development and empathy.
- **A Study from Yale:** Joanna talked about a study at Yale that showed that infants preferred characters who were helpful. Click [HERE](#) to watch the video!

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+ Toddlers:

- **Co-regulation Regulation:** We understand that humans develop the ability to manage their emotions, bodies, and behavior independently between the ages of five and twenty-five (self-regulation). In infants and toddlers, we refer to this process as co-regulation, as they rely on their caregivers to help manage their emotional states.
- **Independence:** Toddlers are highly focused on asserting their independence and developing their sense of identity. It's important to support them by setting appropriate expectations that allow them to gain more control and decision-making abilities in their daily routines, fostering their growing independence.
- **Behavior Guidance:** How can we tune into each toddler's needs? By providing focused attention, supporting their understanding of expectations, and learning how to meet those expectations. It's like a dance, but through our respectful actions, we can guide them. Toddlers can develop social and emotional skills through leadership opportunities, learning friendship skills, and beginning to develop empathy. This also helps them understand others' perspectives and respond to emotions in the classroom.
- **Regard for Student Perspectives:** We can promote choice and independence within the structure of the classroom by offering developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to do things on their own. Establishing routines can gradually increase their independence. Consider how you can arrange your classroom and routines to support their autonomy.

Toddlers in building friendships: Play is a developmental skill that evolves over time. It starts with onlooker play and progresses to parallel play during the toddler years. Here are some ways to support toddlers as they grow in their play.

- **Label Their Actions:** Verbalize what the child's peer is doing, what they are feeling, and what they are thinking and saying.
- **Label Their Peers' Actions:** It's all about choice for the toddlers - you need to have those opportunities for peer interaction to begin to build those skills and then to use our language to label the environment to call their attention to their friends in the classroom.
- **Label Your Actions:** Labeling your thoughts, feelings, and actions helps infants develop emotional literacy and understand emotions, which is crucial for their emotional development.

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+ Preschool years:

- **Self-regulation:** Preschoolers are beginning to develop self-regulation skills, and you can use the environment to help them learn how to manage their emotions (e.g., using signs around the room). It's important to recognize that during this stage, they are not only learning from their interactions with you but also learning to calm down and manage their bodies, feelings, and behaviors. Visual cues in the environment can help children learn how to regulate themselves.
- **Safe Places:** Create spaces, like a calm-down corner, where children can go.
- **Routines:** In some classrooms, there are certain practices that focus on promoting a strong sense of community and togetherness. These include greeting each other in the morning, taking note of who is present and who is absent, and extending good wishes to those who are not in attendance. These rituals can help foster a sense of belonging and create a supportive environment in the classroom. can build up a sense of belonging and community.
- **Utilize Peer Models:** It doesn't all have to be on adults in these years! Peer models (especially mixed-age classrooms) work well, where you can have other children assist in problem-solving and helping to regulate emotions. They can also share the perspectives of others and help resolve conflicts over sharing or turn-taking. Check out this [video](#) Joanna mentioned in the podcast).
- **The Role of Peacemaker:** Joanna shared an example of a job in a classroom as a peacemaker. There was a peacemaker stick that the children decorated together, and if there was a conflict, the designated peacemaker would bring the stick over and help the children to resolve the conflict.

Joanna then discusses Cognitive Development that occurs during these transformative years:

- The theory of the mind is when children begin to recognize that others think differently than they do, which is a huge cognitive milestone. Being able to take the perspective of another is a key skill that even adults struggle with, but it ultimately leads to empathy. It's so important to recognize diversity throughout our interactions with children and through the experiences we offer to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Joanna emphasizes, " We want the classroom experience to be a mirror where children see themselves, but also a window where they can see other ways of being and forms of knowledge."

How can educators ensure they model acceptance and elicit other perspectives throughout the day?

- **Culture and routine:** Interactions with children are heavily influenced by cultural norms. To provide care that aligns with their home environment, it's essential to inquire about families' practices, such as sleep and feeding habits.
- **Ask, Acknowledge, and Adapt Framework:** Engaging in conversations that acknowledge differences and adapting to them sends a powerful message to children. It shows that you value diversity, respect various forms of knowledge, and are open to adapting as necessary.
- **Consider your body language:** Joanna states, " I think sometimes, as educators, we are not aware of how strong our body language is. When we are dismissive of family practice or not inclusive of different languages, we are giving a message that is not inclusive and really doesn't support the idea of valuing and taking the perspective of others."

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