



Supporting the Development of Empathy

At about the age of 2, a child looks in the mirror and identifies themselves as an independent being. At this stage of development, a toddler begins to separate their feelings from those of others and learns that others have their own thoughts and ideas, which may differ from the child's own. According to the California Department of Education,



“During the first three years of life, children begin to develop the capacity to experience the emotional or psychological state of another person” (2009, p. 11). Over time, awareness of other people's emotions grows, and babies and toddlers begin to realize that other children have similar experiences as they do. From here, children's development of empathy begins to emerge.

Empathy can be defined as “knowing what another person is feeling,” “feeling what another person is feeling,” and “responding compassionately to another's distress” (California Department of Education, 2009, p. 11). Empathy is closely tied to the emerging sense of self, when children experience that they are separate from—yet connected to—others. Primary caregivers can help babies and toddlers learn about their own emotional experiences by helping them identify emotions and connect meaningful experiences to emotions.

A Caregiver's Critical Role

Healthy social-emotional development for babies and toddlers occurs through warm, positive, and secure relationships with caring and nurturing adults. Emotional development begins early in life and is a critical aspect of development that is firmly tied to all other areas of a child's growth and development.

In child care settings, infant/toddler caregivers play an important role in helping babies and toddlers develop empathy. Acknowledging and understanding that babies are not born with this ability is critically important, and they need supportive adults to help them grow and develop in this area.



Caregivers may observe the following signs that babies and toddlers are developing empathy:



Around 8 months of age, children react to the emotional expressions of others (California Department of Education, 2009).



Around 18 months of age, toddlers alter their behavior based on others' feelings, having some understanding of the reason another person is experiencing that feeling, and may attempt to comfort others (California Department of Education, 2009).



Around 36 months of age, toddlers recognize that others have feelings that differ from their own and demonstrate an early ability to genuinely comfort others (California Department of Education, 2009).

In child care settings, caregivers can support babies' and toddlers' development of empathy by doing the following:

- ◆ Reading stories about feelings (for example, *I Am Happy: A Touch and Feel Book of Feelings* by Steve Light, *Baby Faces* by DK Publishing, *When I Am/Cuando Estoy* by Gladys Rosa-Mendoza, and *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr)
- ◆ Showing empathy to toddlers (for example, “Are you feeling scared of that loud sound? The vacuum cleaner makes a loud sound. That can be scary. I will hold you while the machine is running.”)
- ◆ Offering children suggestions for demonstrating empathy (for example, “Marquel fell and hurt his knee. Let’s go check on him and see if he is okay.”)
- ◆ Using play! You can subtly guide children's play to encourage empathy (for example, use puppets to role play social stories showing empathy between characters, and label the emotions you see characters exhibiting in books: “Sarah looks like she’s hungry. Let’s put some pretend snacks on her plate, too!”)
- ◆ Catching and documenting your toddlers being “super” friends (for example, capture caring exchanges between children in your classroom, display the pictures, and label them with the children’s names and their helpful behaviors)
- ◆ Using open-ended questioning to encourage empathic reflection with older toddlers (for example, “How can we help Rodney feel better about this?”—this allows children to brainstorm meaningful ways to show kindness and empathy)

Additional Resources

- ◆ [Books About Feelings for Babies and Toddlers](#)
- ◆ [Let's Talk About Empathy Video](#)

As a caregiver to babies and toddlers, you play a critical role in supporting their emotional development. Through your nurturing, secure, and responsive relationships, and the welcoming and inclusive environment you create for them, you can help very young children do the hard work of developing the emotional wellness and competence they will need for the rest of their life.



Reference

California Department of Education. (2009). *California infant/toddler learning and development foundations*.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/itfoundations2009.pdf>

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