

Parental Empathy in a Nutshell

Definition of Empathy

- To understand what another person is experiencing (feeling, thinking).
- To convey to another person in words that you understand what he or she is experiencing (feeling, thinking).
- Empathy is NOT “Putting *yourself* in someone else’s shoes,” but rather “Imagining you are someone else (i.e., your teen), in someone else’s shoes.”

Important Note: Feelings are not right or wrong; *they just are*. If a teen detects you are not validating his or her feelings, he or she will become more upset and simply work harder to convince you that he or she has a good reason to be upset (upping the ante).

Goals of Empathy

- Defuse a potentially explosive situation
- Make an empathic connection and/or a stronger relationship
- Help the teen build his or her feelings vocabulary
- Teach the teen to discuss and/or process intense negative feelings rather than act them out
- Build self-esteem (“My feelings and/or thoughts matter, so *I* matter!”)

How to Give Empathy

- “You seem _____ (feeling word).”
- “You sound _____ (feeling word).”
- “You look _____ (feeling word).”
- Fill in the blank with a feelings word (e.g., *mad, sad, glad, frustrated*).

Mirroring Stems

- “Sounds like you feel as though. . .”
- “Sounds like you’re saying that. . .”
- “So what I’m hearing is that. . .”

Empathy Busters (S.S.S.S.L.U.R.P.P.E.D.D.)

- Sympathy: “You poor thing.” “How horrible that is.” “My poor baby.”
- Sarcasm: “I’ll give you something to cry about.” “Oh, it’s just the end of the world.” “Boo hoo, whah, whah, what a crying shame.”
- Shame, blame, and put downs: “Sounds like you deserved it.” “You should have known better.” “Why did you provoke him?” “You are so selfish.”
- Scolding: “You should have known better.” “You should have studied harder.” “You should have practiced more.” “How dare you say that?”
- Lecturing: “You really need to work harder. If you don’t get your act together, you’re going to fail, and if you fail now, then you’ll grow up a failure. You should really take things more seriously.”
- Unsolicited advice: “Well if I were you. . .” “I think you should. . .” “Why don’t you just. . .?”
- Reassurance: “Your hair will grow back.” “There are other fish in the sea.” “Nobody will notice.” “There will be other games (or tests, friends, dances, and so forth).”
- Philosophy lesson: “Life is like that.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “This setback will make you stronger.” “It was God’s will.” “Big boys don’t cry.”
- Psychoanalysis: “Did it ever occur to you that the real reason. . .?” “You’re only saying that because. . .” “You’re just upset because. . .”
- Enemy (Defending the. . .): “What did *you* do to invite that?” “The teacher was just trying to. . .” “No wonder Johnny did that.” “You probably asked for it.” “I’m sure she didn’t mean it.”
- Dismissing feelings: “It’s not that big a deal.” “You shouldn’t feel that way.” “I’ll give you something to cry about.” “Get over it.”
- Detective: “So what happened?” “Why are you so mad (upset, sad, frustrated)?” “So what are you going to do?” “Why didn’t you study harder?”

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