

2.8 Empathy

Definition of the skill

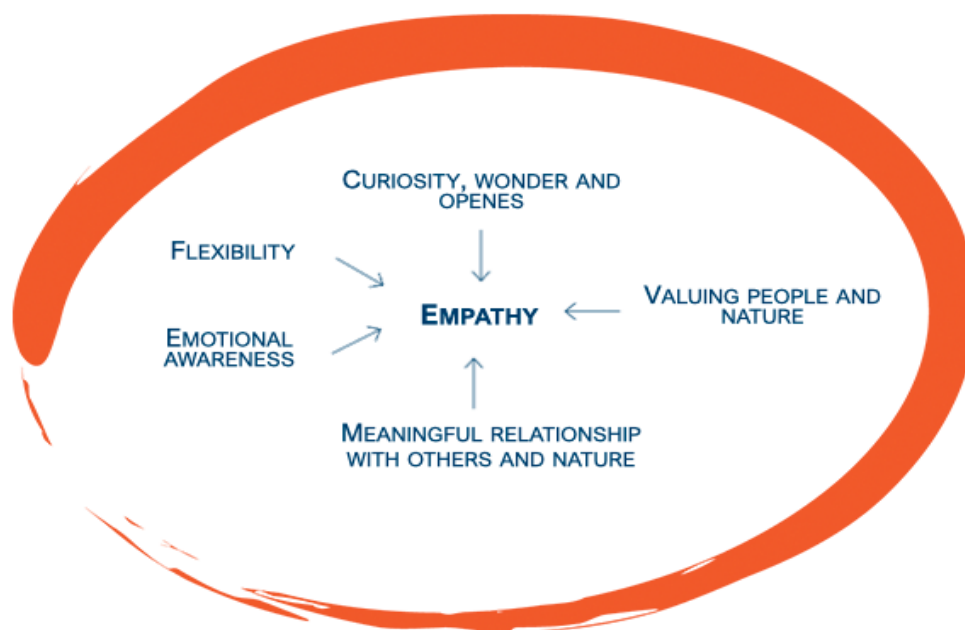
Empathy is the ability to understand and share the emotions and viewpoints of others, putting oneself in their shoes both emotionally and cognitively. This skill is at the heart of interpersonal relationships and lays the foundation for creating a more harmonious and cooperative society.

Empathy has two key dimensions:

- Emotional empathy, which refers to the capacity to feel what others feel and respond with appropriate emotions.
- Cognitive empathy, which involves understanding another person's perspective or mental state without necessarily sharing their emotions.

Both aspects are essential for children as they navigate complex social interactions in their personal and academic lives.

Complexity of the skill



- **Emotional awareness:** The basis of empathy is that children are able to recognize and name their own feelings and those of others. This creates the foundation for them to respond appropriately to the feelings of others.
- **Meaningful relationship building** empathy requires quality social relationships because it helps children form deeper bonds, making them aware that they themselves are part of a community and enabling them to listen to and understand each other.
- **Valuing people and nature:** for children to have empathy for others, they need to learn to respect and appreciate differences between people, whether their feelings, thoughts or

cultures. This attitude can also extend to nature. Children will wonder at the diversity of the living world, and in doing so they will develop a more responsible, caring relationship.

- **Curiosity, wonder and openness:** true empathy can only develop if children are open and curious about the stories, perspectives and feelings of others. Inquiry promotes attentive listening and understanding.
- **Flexibility:** being empathetic also means that children are able to put aside their own perspective and see the situation from the other's point of view. This requires emotional flexibility.

Importance of the skill for lifelong well-being

Teaching empathy to children is crucial to prepare them for life in an increasingly fast-paced and changing society, where social and work interactions require strong interpersonal skills and adaptability. Below are the main benefits of cultivating empathy in children:

- **Improves Social Skills:** empathy equips children with the ability to understand others, handle conflicts constructively, and build positive relationships. In a globalized and interconnected society, collaborating with diverse groups is essential for success.
- **Fosters Inclusion and Tolerance:** an empathic approach nurtures respect for cultural, ethnic, social, and ideological differences. This skill becomes vital as children grow into adults navigating increasingly multicultural and diverse environments.
- **Stimulates Critical Thinking and Adaptability:** understanding others' perspectives fosters open-mindedness, helping children adapt to new situations and approach challenges with innovative solutions. This cognitive flexibility also enables them to make ethical decisions in complex situations.
- **Promotes Resilience and Emotional Well-Being:** Empathy helps children connect with their own emotions and those of others, equipping them with tools to cope with stress, frustration, and challenges. This emotional awareness serves as a foundation for lifelong mental health.
- **Builds Responsible Leaders and Citizens:** Empathy shapes future leaders who lead with sensitivity, considering the needs of their community. It also fosters active citizenship, with individuals committed to contributing to a more equitable society.

Manifestation and development of this skill in ages 6-10

Children aged 6 to 10 are in a crucial developmental phase where empathy begins to emerge in both emotional and cognitive forms. At ages 6–7, children show a basic understanding of others' feelings but remain largely focused on concrete and visible emotions; for instance, they may respond with concern if they see a peer crying but might struggle to grasp more subtle emotional cues, often mimicking compassionate behaviours modelled by adults or peers. At ages 8–9, they begin to grasp that others can have feelings and experiences different from their own, developing the ability to infer emotions from less overt cues such as body language or tone of voice, and might start showing genuine acts of kindness, like comforting a friend without being prompted. By age 10, children exhibit a more advanced form of empathy that incorporates both emotional and cognitive elements; they understand complex emotional scenarios, such as conflicting emotions, and can anticipate how their actions affect others, consciously avoiding saying something hurtful due to understanding its emotional impact.

Observation parameters for establishing class level

Level 1: At this level, children begin to distinguish their own emotions from those of others and can respond to obvious emotional signals (such as crying or sadness). However, their ability to put themselves in the shoes of others is limited to visible and concrete situations. They follow simple empathic behaviour patterns, responding with care and concern when they see another child in pain, but tend to react only if the pain is explicit.

Level 2: At this stage, children develop a greater ability to ‘take the perspective’ of others, i.e. to understand that even without overt emotional expressions, other people may have different emotions and may be influenced by external factors. This is the stage at which they begin to understand that actions can influence the emotions of others, even in contexts that cannot be directly observed.

Level 3: Around the age of 10, children are able to display a more mature form of empathy, involving both emotional and cognitive understanding. They can perceive another person's emotions even if they are not expressed overtly and can engage in empathic behaviour by anticipating how their actions may affect the emotions of others. This is also the age at which children begin to develop the ability to emotionally support others, offering advice or seeking solutions to others' problems.

Interconnections with other skills

- **Active Listening:** Empathy enhances the ability to truly listen and understand others, creating a foundation for meaningful communication.
- **Effective Communication:** Empathetic individuals can express themselves in ways that resonate with others' emotions and perspectives, fostering clarity and connection.
- **Collaboration and Teamwork:** Empathy promotes mutual understanding, crucial for working effectively in teams and building strong, cooperative relationships.
- **Conflict Management:** An empathic approach helps resolve conflicts by addressing underlying emotional needs and finding solutions acceptable to all parties.
- **Leadership:** Empathy enables leaders to motivate and inspire by understanding the emotions and needs of their team members.
- **Adaptability:** Understanding diverse perspectives allows empathic individuals to adapt more easily to new environments and challenges.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** Empathy is a core component of emotional intelligence, enabling better self-awareness and interpersonal relationships.
- **Respect and Inclusiveness:** Empathy fosters an environment of respect and inclusion by valuing others' experiences and viewpoints.

Didactical tips for teachers

To foster empathy during these stages, adults can:

- Encourage perspective-taking through role-playing or storytelling.
- Discuss moral dilemmas that require considering others' feelings.
- Provide opportunities for cooperative learning and group activities.
- Model empathic behaviour consistently.

- Use role-play scenarios where children act out different emotions and discuss their feelings.
- Read stories highlighting characters' emotions, then invite students to consider those perspectives.
- Encourage “emotion journals” where students reflect on daily interactions and identify others' feelings.
- Praise empathetic responses and acknowledge when students support each other.
- Organize small-group activities that promote cooperation, mutual understanding, and listening.
- Introduce a “feelings corner” where children can safely express emotions and receive supportive feedback.

