

## Know! To Foster Empathy for Bullying Prevention

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In a previous tip, **Know! The End of Bullying Begins With YOU**, we learned that more than one in five students reported being bullied. Regardless of what position a child is in - a target, bully, or bystander – they are at an increased risk for a variety of mental health and behavioral problems, including substance abuse.

In addition to positive role modeling and conversations specifically telling our children, “It is never okay to hurt, harm or humiliate another person with your words or behavior,” we can further help prevent bullying by fostering empathy.

**Empathy** is the power to understand perspectives other than your own; the ability to recognize and share the emotions of another person. Essentially it is, “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes.” Experts say empathy is an essential life skill that all youth should be taught to master, and that youth who are more empathetic tend to perform better in school and have healthier relationships. It is a popular belief, in fact, that a person’s emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (E.Q.), which includes one’s ability to empathize, carries more weight than a person’s intelligence quotient (I.Q.) when it comes to determining one’s overall success in life.

Empathy is also an essential factor in teaching youth what bullying is and how NOT to engage in it.

Here are some ways to teach and strengthen young people’s ability to empathize:

**Make sure your child’s emotional needs are being met:** It is hard for young people to treat others with understanding and kindness when they do not feel loved or appreciated themselves. It is very common for youth to bully others when they’re feeling insecure or envious (due to grades, sports or popularity- for example). To help your child avoid such feelings, strive to be a warm and loving parent and celebrate who your child is, instead of focusing on who he or she is not.

Make certain your child can identify and share their feelings: The idea here is to get your son or daughter to express their feelings – even the negative ones – without tantrums, violence or bullying. When youth can recognize and talk about their own feelings, they will be better equipped to identify and understand similar feelings in others.

**Encourage your son or daughter to explore others’ perspectives:** Teach your child to be open-minded and look at a situation from another person’s point of view. For instance, refer to the elderly man you saw at the grocery store struggling to push his cart, then ask your teen to imagine how much more challenging it is for him to do that and other simple tasks we take for granted. Youth who learn to become more sensitive to the experiences and feelings of others are much more likely to understand how the special needs student, for example, might feel in different situations at school – and less likely to target them.

**Model empathy and engage youth using everyday opportunities:** As we all know; actions speak louder than words. When you make dinner for a neighbor whose loved one passed away, explain why you’re responding the way you are, then have your child go with you to deliver it. When you go through your kids’ outgrown clothes to donate to those in need, talk about who their clothes benefit and how they are improving another young person’s situation.

**Teach your child to find common ground with others and imagine their feelings:** Research shows that youth are more likely to feel empathetic toward another if they can somehow relate to how that person might be feeling. Remind your child, for example, how hurt they were when they weren’t invited to a friend’s party. Now help them make the connection to imagine how the girl who sits alone at lunch every day must feel; your child may now be more inclined to invite them to sit at their table.

**Talk to your child about how their behavior impacts others:** Make sure your teen understands how cruel and damaging it can be to gossip and spread rumors about someone, whether it's true or false. Talk to them about how even posting a fun picture of the party they attended could be quite hurtful to those who weren't invited.

While some youth are naturally more empathetic than others, it is truly a skill that can be fostered and strengthened. As parents, it is our responsibility to teach our children to look beyond themselves to be more mindful, understanding, respectful and considerate of other people's complex emotions, feelings and experiences.