



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

TRENDS

TEACHING EMPATHY: CRITICAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to sweeping changes and disruptions in nearly every aspect of daily life. With mandates and guidelines changing all the time, many young people feel overwhelmed by their own anxieties. It is important for educators to model empathy and help students learn and practice empathy skills during this time.

Empathizing with others can help young people feel less lonely and more connected. During periods of social isolation, identifying positive ways to connect with others and increasing helping behaviors, improves student's abilities to regulate their emotions during times of stress. Feeling empathy allows youth to better manage the anxiety they may be experiencing without feeling overwhelmed.

Empathy is the ability to notice, understand, and share the emotions of others. It is a critical social skill for all people to have. In many ways, empathy is the social skill that paves the way for all other social skills. It helps us to take in someone else's perspective, understand others' emotions, connect with one another, show compassion, make good social choices, and develop lasting relationships.

Children and youth who lack empathy can end up with many social challenges. These young people may struggle to build friendships, have difficulty working with others, and make poor social decisions overall. Most importantly young people who lack empathy are often unaware that their behaviors can negatively impact others. These individuals might do or say something that makes sense to them in the moment, without giving consideration to those around them.

Youth who lack empathy skills may:

- Do or say something that appears rude or inappropriate, such as loudly commenting on someone else's physical difference.

- Engage in socially unexpected behaviors, such as cutting to the front of the line when they want to be first.
- Make comments that hurt others' feelings, such as telling someone their clothing is ugly.
- Fail to recognize times to be sensitive to others, such as mentioning that a peer looks "bad" when h/she is ill.

It is critical for educators to recognize that having a lack of empathy is a skill deficit and not a behavior problem. There are many ways to teach, highlight, and practice skills for empathy, so these abilities can be learned over time. It's important to realize that some students are going to struggle with these skills more than others.

Students may display empathy skills by consoling, comforting, calming, supporting, and encouraging others. Here are some activities that may promote the development of empathy skills in the classroom and community:

- Use literature, current events, or video clips to demonstrate empathetic behaviors.
- Encourage students to teach others how to be more empathetic (e.g., perform a skit, create a comic strip, write a short story, sing or rap original lyrics).
- Have students form pairs and practice interviewing a peer, then sharing what they've learned about them.

- Engage students in learning about people from different backgrounds and cultures.
- Encourage students to get to know their classmates: eat lunch with someone different or partner with someone you don't know for a learning activity.
- Have students practice a random act of kindness for another person. This may be a classmate, or someone else in the school or outside the community. It may be as simple as writing a letter thanking someone for what they do, or helping someone with a project they are working on.
- Promote service learning- Invite representatives from community organizations to come to your classroom and explain what they do. Ask your students to become involved in community service and then reflect and write about their experience. Getting students involved in community service is a great way to build empathy.
- Facilitate opportunities for students to tutor and/or act as mentors for other students.

To learn more:

- Engaging Classroom Activities to Teach Empathy <https://everfi.com/blog/k-12/teaching-empathy/>
- Teaching Children Empathy Using Social-Emotional Learning Theory - <https://resilienteducator.com/classroom-resources/teaching-children-empathy-sel/>



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