How Children Learn Empathy, ep. 19

Kimberly: [00:00:00] Are you interested in knowing your young child in a whole new way, understanding what's really going on in their developing mind? Does your child say or do things that make you stop and wonder, where did that come from? Well, welcome to the Hidden Language of Children Podcast, where we explore child development and the challenges of being a parent. I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, Clinical Director at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio, where we help children learn to understand and manage their feelings so that they can become the boss of themselves. I'm here again with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum. What are we talking about today, Bob?

Bob: Hi Kim. So yeah, if you ask any parent what do you want your child to grow into, at some point they're going to say something like, "I want Junior to become an empathetic, caring human being." So let's talk about empathy. You know where I always like to start. Let's start with a simple definition. What is [00:01:00] empathy?

Kimberly: OK. I think we all like to think we understand what empathy is but it does help for all of us to get on the same page. So empathy in its simplest form is the ability to see the world or a situation or a moment in time through the perspective of someone else. It often comes across as, "I know what that feels like," or, "oh, that happened to me once." But it isn't about projecting your person onto their person. It's about really listening and being able to hear what they're saying and see the world from their perspective.

Bob: It's also not about taking their perspective necessarily. Right.

Kimberly: No, no, no. Empathy does not require agreement, and it doesn't require sympathy. Sympathy is feeling for the situation of someone else. I feel sorry for you. That is sympathy. [00:02:00] That is not empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in that person's place and imagine how they feel or how they think.

Bob: OK, so there are some people out there, prominent people out there who have, who have said empathy is a waste of time or a waste of money, um, or unnecessary. I, I don't understand it that way. I understand empathy as being critical to human interactions.

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

One example, um, could you play chess with somebody if you didn't have empathy? You wouldn't be able to predict what their next move might be. Or share dinner with somebody and, um, they say, can you pass the potatoes? And you know that maybe you should pass the gravy right along with it.

Kimberly: You're exactly right, Bob. I think sometimes we get confused about empathy and agreement, which is what you mentioned. [00:03:00] So understanding how someone feels and knowing that if they want the potatoes, they are likely to also want the gravy — doesn't necessarily mean that that person, by the way, is going to want the gravy — but the ability to anticipate is part of all interactions. The ability to know that somebody else might feel the same, but also may feel differently and, and that is how we see each other as separate individuals. And we know we want to have empathy because empathy is part of attachment. When we start to talk to people and say, oh, we have that in common. Something as simple as that is an example of developing rapport through empathy. Does that make sense?

Bob: Yeah, it makes perfect sense and, and it fits the thesis. Empathy is fundamental to human interaction. Uh, without it, we would be a very [00:04:00] different world. So it doesn't come out of nowhere. Children don't suddenly wake up one day and have this ability to understand somebody else's point of view. At what age does empathy develop.

Kimberly: So that is a measure of some debate. Uh, some people think children very young have the ability to be empathic. Other people think that it's much later. It's always within the first, like, let's say six years of life. However. I think that a lot of us have gotten way more comfortable thinking about things that exist on a spectrum, and I think if we look at empathy and the development of empathy on a spectrum, what we can see relatively early on are the building blocks of empathy. The signals of that relational component of how we interact with other people. So if we want to talk about the earliest time we're [00:05:00] talking about when children begin to understand differences. You cannot empathize without understanding that you are separate from other people. So this is me. That's you. Me, mommy, me, daddy, me, sister, grandma. Putting those labels and separating.

I always love to tell this story. Um, I have a godchild and when he was very young, he believed he was in control. This was when he was like 4, so this is further along the spectrum. He knew they were separate, but he still wanted to be able to control his mother. So when he did something wrong he could empathize: He knew she

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

was now mad at him because of repeated exposures to that particular dynamic. But he went up to her and he laid hands on her and he said, stay happy. And it's very cute, right, when kids do that? That is [00:06:00] not a full experience of empathy, but it's the building blocks. He had to know and predict that facial expression meant she was experiencing something and the experience she was having of anger was not his experience because his experience was guilt or fear, let's say, right, of her anger. But he wouldn't have been able to say, stay happy he didn't first recognize that she was unhappy. So it's this, developing awareness of you as a separate person who gives me cues about what you are thinking and about what you are feeling. And then I can also understand those because I've had those feelings too. So it starts very basic. The seeds of it may start with language, you know.

Bob: Or maybe even before [00:07:00] I, I, I imagine that that knowledge of being a separate person from mommy, um, might proceed language.

Kimberly: That perception of self and others starts with all kinds of things we don't have time to go into like object permanence, but let's just say you start working on it in infancy. You start to see the manifestation of it, the, the examples of it. As soon as a toddler can run away from you and giggles about it, they know you're a separate object, something that they can leave, right?

You are a person that they can run away from and then they can run back. They can laugh and they can try to get you to laugh. Those would be the nonverbal, um, pieces of evidence that there is a self and an other, and a dawning awareness of the fact that what you do has a, has a reaction from other people, um, and that can have a fantasy of being in control [00:08:00] of that reaction. So that would be like the really, really early signs of it.

Bob: Now Bob's rule, when you use a piece of jargon, we have to define it. You use the phrase object permanence. So without digressing very far, let's at least say what that means.

Kimberly: OK. A newborn child does not recognize that if something leaves their sight it continues to exist. They won't go looking for something. There is this moment that we often see when a child starts to wake up in their crib and cry, and that cry brings the caregiver to them. But there comes a time when the child recognizes that the parent continues to exist even when they're not within eye shot.

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

And that is usually most exemplified by either calling out for the parent or chasing after the parent when the parent is out of [00:09:00] sight.

Bob: So we've established. Step number one is the self-awareness that I am one person and there are other people out there who are not me.

Um, and they continue to exist when I don't see them. What's the next step?

Kimberly: So The next step is that they have thoughts and feelings that are not mine.

Bob: Your godchild does something that makes mommy mad, um, but didn't necessarily feel mad himself having done it. When does that come in? I mean, how much longer does that take to develop? Hmm.

Kimberly: You can start to see that in the second year. You can start to, you know, you can start to see it. It just, it's easier to see once there's language to wrap around it once the child starts responding to you in words. But you can see it. You can see it in behavior, you can see an attempt to, um get a certain response from your parents, [00:10:00] in that, in that second year.

But that's what I mean by a spectrum. Seeds. You see little seeds of this. Would you say that your child has empathy? No, not in the way we understand it as adults, you know, that doesn't come into play until we can use our language to say things like, "we don't bite in our family. Biting makes people feel sad. Do you like it when you get bit?"

That is much more complex empathy. "I'm going to restrain myself from doing something because I can imagine how it would make somebody else feel."

Bob: So, so we've skipped ahead a couple, a couple, uh, building blocks in...

Kimberly: it's not really skipping ahead too many building blocks. It's just that those, those first building blocks of recognizing differences last for quite some time.

Bob: OK.

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

Kimberly: Then when you get language, there's kind of an explosion of development.

Bob: OK. OK. So, and, and at some point, and, and I guess this, this must come along [00:11:00] with language. At some point there begins to be this recognition that this other person has different feelings than I have. But there also has to be an understanding of what my feelings mean and what this other person's feelings mean.

Right?

Kimberly: Yes. So, yeah, so don't think not all of these things are on the same spectrum, right?

Empathy develops because of a lot of things that are developing at the same time. So at the same time as you're understanding differences, you're also learning about attachment, about this human desire for companionship, for connection, for attachment, and we're born with that too. So think about it more as like tracks of development that interweave, they separate, they interweave, they separate, they interweave. So as you're learning that you can have an impact on somebody else, you're also learning that when you lose, when you create a [00:12:00] reaction in them makes them separate from you by either leaving or getting angry, something that disconnects you, that that feels bad, and you want to then avoid that.

Bob: Yeah, that makes sense. OK. Um, so, but let's, let's talk about learning to understand what the feelings mean, um, and learning to understand that the feelings that you have are normal. Everybody has this type of feeling, uh, that that has to be a part of it, right? If, if you thought your feelings were completely unique and everybody else's feelings were completely unique and detached from yours, you could never develop empathy.

That's a question.

Kimberly: No. Yes, that is correct. Yeah, that is, yeah, that's correct. Because what, what you're doing, we're trying to unravel a really complex thing that comes in many, many pieces. So everybody is born with the capacity to have certain [00:13:00] feelings: good, bad, disgust. Like there, there are certain sensory feelings that happen, but until you have caregivers who name those feelings, you don't really know what to do with them or what they're called. So all of this early

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

interaction with your caregivers is about them modeling for you, reacting to you, and literally, with language naming for you what this experience is that you're having, and through that naming and talking over and over and over again, that's how children learn what their feelings mean.

Bob: So first, you have to be aware that there's you and others. Then you have to be aware that you have feelings, and you have to learn what those feelings mean. And then there's this self-esteem component that we haven't talked about. You have to learn that your [00:14:00] feelings actually matter.

Right. I mean, there are, there are people who don't have that experience. Um, we talk, you know, we talk about bullying that part of the dynamic of becoming a bully is that the difficult feelings you may have inside aren't necessarily honored or aren't respected, or aren't responded to in a constructive way.

So what you learn is "my feelings don't matter. Why would anybody else's?"

Kimberly: Yeah, let's break that down.

Bob: Yeah. Thank you.

Kimberly: Yeah. So I think what is most interesting to parents a lot of the stuff you and I are talking about is done unconsciously and reactively because it was done for us, right? It was done for us. Or we've read parenting books, whatever. But I don't always think that parents get the opportunity to think deeply about what their [00:15:00] instinctual reaction to children is actually doing. And that's what we're talking about, right? This isn't like take out the flashcards and do a new thing with your parenting. It's just more about appreciating that when you're playing with your infant and you're saying peekaboo, that you are developing the building blocks for self and other. When you are saying, "Oh, I'm so sorry; that's uncomfortable," that is indicating that your feelings have value. So it is a part of every reaction that you have to your child. It'll be OK, right? The things that undo that, I'll, I'll just tell you like what are the red flags that you want to avoid are things like, "I'll give you something to cry about. You are just tired. Don't be silly." If we could avoid those, we would, we would be better off generally speaking. But the good enough parent, [00:16:00] which is what we can all hope to aspire to be — no perfection; just good enough — validates a child's feelings reflexively. I'm so sorry. Oh, you fell down and hurt yourself. Let me take a look.

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

All of those interactions that you just do in the care of a child from a place of love recognizes a feeling, validates a feeling, labels it. And then what do you do about it? And some of the cutest things you can see, certainly in preschool we see it, where a child can see another child struggling and they will go up to that child and echo the words that their mother used for them when they were having a similar feeling. That's empathy, right? That's not complex empathy, but it's, it's this empathy in its simplest form. Or what happens even more commonly when a child has words, [00:17:00] is the child will say to the parent what the parent has said to the child when they were having a sad feeling.

I don't know why we're using this example today of my godson, but we're going to use it again. When I would leave after visiting, he would sometimes, be upset with me about that. And so he would refuse to say goodbye, right? That was his avoidance. And if I left, I would get a phone call in the car because somebody was crying because they didn't get a chance to say goodbye, right? There was regret, and what I used to say all the time was, love you anyway. It's OK. You can be angry. I love you anyway. It's OK. You can be sad. I love you anyway. That was just one of the things that we said to each other, or that I said to him, and then when he was about 4, still around this same age, something had happened and the grownups were upset. I think there was a loss of some kind, [00:18:00] and he came up to me and said, I love you anyway. That was empathy. The circumstance may have been different, but he recognized the feeling and responded in the way that he had been responded to.

Bob: So the big reminder is everything that we do is a model for our children, and we help build empathy by being empathetic to the children.

Kimberly: It's why apologizing to your children is so important. People think that it creates this weird power differential if you apologize and admit mistakes to your child. But if you want your child to be able to admit to mistakes and apologize genuinely and sincerely to other people, they have to first see what it looks like.

Bob: By preschool, kindergarten, they're now mixing daily with a bunch of kids and over the course of a five hour day might see dozens [00:19:00] of interactions that call for some form of empathy. So I imagine it gets supercharged once they get into that social environment. And, and they learn quick. They learn quickly.

Kimberly: Being able to share, um, being able to see that somebody, um, wants to play with you. Like, here's another interaction potentially that shows some

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

empathy. You're, you're a child and you're building with blocks on the floor, and another child comes up with you, comes up to you and says, can I build with you? And you don't want to really build with them right now, right? And you say no, and then they appear uh, disappointed and the child who's been spoken to pulls their recognition of that and says, maybe later? That happens all the time in our school — just that interaction.

Bob: Are there people who don't ever develop [00:20:00] empathy?

Kimberly: Well, that's a big question. Um, sociopaths don't develop empathy, usually because of trauma. But everyone has empathy to a certain degree if we think about It on the spectrum, right? So nobody doesn't develop empathy. Some behaviors in children can appear as if they are not experiencing empathy. Um, a gifted child who sees another child fall down and gets a bump on their head and the child walks over with a ruler and wants to measure the bump on the head. That's not a lack of empathy. That is the child trying to understand what happened in the best way that they can and faltering on the expression of empathy, right? They were worried and so they were [00:21:00] going to go be a doctor, right? And what have you seen doctors do? Well, we need to measure it. And is it OK? And are you like, they took on the role of doctor but they missed the boat kind of emotionally, maybe.

Bob: We had a conversation the other day about this, um, and you brought up the topic of people who are on the autism spectrum. Um, and they too develop empathy, but other people may not understand their expressions of it.

Kimberly: We often say about people who are on the spectrum that they don't read social cues well. But there is a desire to connect with others. It just doesn't always look the same. And so it's about building relationships so that people can understand how the other person is trying to express their feelings.

Another place where it can look like somebody is missing on empathy is if a child has a big trouble, sometimes [00:22:00] they can do or say mean things. And it looks as if they don't have a lot of feeling for somebody else. But what they're actually doing is saying mean things to keep people away from them because they have anxiety.

And so the mean things are a tool to keep people at a distance. That's not a lack of empathy. That's a defense mechanism against a worry and a fear. So I think we, we

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

can never jump to conclusions until we understand why somebody appears to be demonstrating a lack of empathy.

Bob: So, so if nothing else, we've certainly demonstrated today that people are complicated. Um.

Kimberly: Yes.

Bob: But, but let's just kinda recap. To develop empathy ...

Kimberly: ... So here's the soundbite for people. If they're saying, like you said at the beginning, I want Junior to become an empathic human being. Step one, recognize your feelings as a [00:23:00] parent. Step two, recognize the feelings of your child. Three, talk to your child. Name those feelings. Validate those feelings. Four, tell your child how you are feeling, how things that they do make you feel. Ask them, I wonder how you would feel if somebody did this to you? Always through communication and wrapping words around it. If you do that, you will develop an empathic human being.

Bob: I think that was a nice outline. Um, should we do a commercial? If you have concerns or challenges about your child, whether it's in school or home, making friends, sleeping, eating, whatever it might be, our mental health clinic is here to help. The Hadden Clinic for Children and families at Hannah Perkins has therapists who specialize in working with children.

They can provide everything from coaching and consultation to [00:24:00] psychotherapy to help your family through the ordinary or the extraordinary circumstances that you are experiencing. Our therapists are licensed in Ohio and many other states, and we can help make a referral if you live in an area that we aren't able to serve.

If you want help call the Hadden Clinic at (216) 991-4472, or just visit the Hanna Perkins website at hannaperkins.org for contact information and help getting started.

Kimberly: If you have questions about parenting or child development, we are happy to answer them. You can send questions by email to HiddenLanguageofChildren@gmail.com. Thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this conversation and found something to take away from it. The Hidden

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.

Language of Children Podcast is a production of the nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio. Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum, and Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. [00:25:00] If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes and share it with friends and family. We welcome your comments and your questions. Again, you can contact us by email at HiddenLanguageofChildren@gmail.com. For more links and information about our approach to healthy child development, you can visit hiddenlanguageofchildren.org.

I'm Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we look forward to seeing you ne

© Copyright 2025
Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development. All rights reserved.