

Empathy Is More Than Being Nice

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Empathy is often associated with kindness, caring, and consideration. While these qualities can accompany empathy, they are not the same thing. Empathy involves recognizing, understanding, and, in some forms, emotionally connecting with another person's experience. Research suggests that empathy can support compassion and prosocial behavior, but understanding another person does not automatically lead to helping or kindness.



Overview

When we describe someone as empathetic, we often mean that they are kind, caring, or considerate. These qualities can certainly accompany empathy. But they are not the same thing.

Kindness describes how we may behave toward another person. Empathy involves something deeper: recognizing and understanding another person's feelings, perspective, or experience and, in some forms of empathy, emotionally resonating with what that person is experiencing.

This distinction matters because a person can act kindly without necessarily understanding another person's experience. In the same way, someone may understand what another person is feeling or thinking without choosing to help.

Empathy and kindness can reinforce one another, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

“Kindness Is Something We Do. Empathy Is How We Understand and Connect.”

What the Research Tells Us

Contemporary research generally understands empathy as a multidimensional capacity rather than a single feeling or behavior. Cognitive dimensions of empathy involve understanding another person's perspective or emotional state. Affective dimensions involve emotionally responding to or resonating with another person's experience.

Research also distinguishes empathy from related concepts such as sympathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior. Compassion involves concern for another person's suffering and an orientation toward their well-being, while prosocial behavior refers to actions intended to benefit others.

Studies consistently find a positive relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior. However, the relationship is not absolute. Empathy can make caring action more likely, but it does not guarantee it. People may behave kindly because of values, social expectations, habit, moral principles, or concern for others, even when empathy is not the primary motivation.

These distinctions help us understand empathy more precisely: empathy concerns how we perceive, understand, and connect with another person's experience; kindness and prosocial behavior concern what we do in response.

Why It Matters

Understanding the difference between empathy and kindness changes how we think about cultivating empathy in children, young people, and ourselves.

Teaching children to “be nice” is valuable. It establishes expectations for respectful and caring behavior. But cultivating empathy asks us to go further. It means helping young people become curious about what another person may be experiencing, consider perspectives different from their own, and recognize that people’s feelings and responses are shaped by experiences they may not immediately see.

These capacities become especially important as young people encounter people from different backgrounds, communities, and life circumstances. Learning to look beyond an immediate behavior or interaction can help build the foundation for a broader understanding of human experience.

That broader understanding is an important step toward social empathy, which extends perspective-taking beyond individual interactions to the wider contexts that shape people’s lives.

Putting Research Into Practice

Families, educators, and communities can move beyond simply encouraging kindness by creating opportunities for deeper understanding:

- Ask what another person might be feeling or experiencing.
- Encourage children and young people to consider perspectives different from their own.
- Listen with curiosity rather than immediately judging or responding.
- Use stories and real-life situations to explore why people may experience the same situation differently.
- Connect caring actions with reflection: What did you notice? What did you understand? What could you do in response?

Key Takeaway

Kindness matters, but empathy is more than being nice.

Empathy involves the capacity to recognize, understand, and connect with experiences beyond our own. That understanding can support compassion and caring action, but empathy, kindness, compassion, and prosocial behavior are distinct concepts.

Seen in this way, empathy can also provide a foundation for social empathy by helping us look beyond a single interaction and consider the broader contexts that shape people’s experiences. Cultivating empathy therefore means more than encouraging people to be kind. It means helping people see beyond themselves, understand experiences different from their own, and consider how that understanding can shape the way we live together.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. When you think of empathy, do you tend to think primarily about kindness, or about understanding another person's experience?
- 2. How can families, schools, and communities encourage young people to become curious about perspectives and experiences different from their own?
- 3. Think about a recent interaction. Did you simply respond kindly, or did you take time to understand why the other person might see or experience the situation differently?

“Empathy asks us not only to care, but to understand.”

Research Foundation

House of US Foundational Paper No. 1 - *Forthcoming*
**Understanding Social Empathy:
What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It
Matters**

Research fields
Psychology · Social Psychology ·
Empathy Research · Prosocial
Development

Conceptual focus
Empathy · Perspective-Taking ·
Compassion · Prosocial Behavior · Social
Empathy

Central question
What is empathy, how does it differ from
related concepts, and how does it provide
a foundation for social empathy?

About the House of US Institute for Social Empathy

The House of US Institute for Social Empathy is dedicated to deepening society's understanding of social empathy and its importance in building healthier communities, stronger democracies, and a more connected world.