

Supportive Environments Matter

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Empathy develops in context.

The environments surrounding children and young people help shape what they learn about relationships, difference, participation, conflict, and care.

Research across developmental psychology, education, youth development, and school climate suggests that supportive social environments - characterized by respect, consistency, meaningful participation, constructive communication, and positive relationships - can strengthen the conditions in which empathy-related capacities develop.

These environments can also support competencies that are especially important to social empathy: considering perspectives beyond one's own, understanding that people are shaped by broader social contexts, engaging constructively across difference, participating meaningfully in community life, and developing a sense of shared responsibility.

Supportive environments do not guarantee empathy or social empathy. But they influence what young people repeatedly experience, observe, and practice - and those everyday experiences can help determine whether the capacities required for social empathy have room to develop.



Overview

Children and young people are always learning from the environments around them.

Some of that learning happens intentionally through lessons, conversations, and guidance. Much of it happens more quietly.

They notice whether people are treated fairly. They observe how adults respond when someone disagrees. They learn whether mistakes lead only to punishment or can also lead to reflection and repair. They see whose ideas are taken seriously. They experience whether difference is treated as something threatening, inconvenient, or worth understanding.

In this sense, every family, classroom, school, team, organization, and community has a social culture. That culture teaches.

It communicates expectations about how people relate to one another, how conflict is handled, how responsibility is shared, and whether people are encouraged to understand perspectives beyond their own.

These everyday conditions can either reinforce empathy-related learning or make it more difficult.

“That culture teaches.”

And because social empathy depends on more than individual feeling, the environments around young people matter in another way as well. They provide the settings in which young people begin to understand how people live together, how different experiences are shaped, how communities function, and what responsibilities come with being part of a shared social world.

What the Research Tells Us

Research on youth development and school climate consistently shows that social and institutional environments influence how young people experience relationships, participation, safety, support, and connection.

Studies examining school culture have found that students who perceive their environments more positively also tend to report stronger empathy and prosocial attitudes.

Research on school climate has also identified several features that support healthy social and emotional development, including supportive relationships, clear expectations, fairness, safety, opportunities for participation, and a sense that adults and peers care about one another.

These conditions matter because empathy requires more than understanding a definition. Young people need opportunities to experience respectful communication, navigate disagreement, collaborate with others, encounter different perspectives, and see adults model constructive responses to conflict and difference.

Research Insight #006

The consistency of those experiences is important.

When young people repeatedly encounter environments where people are listened to, treated with dignity, held accountable fairly, and encouraged to participate, those social norms become part of what they learn about living with others.

Supportive environments therefore function not simply as a backdrop to development. They are part of the developmental experience itself.

They can also help young people begin to build broader social understanding. Through participation in families, schools, peer groups, and communities, young people encounter different experiences, learn how decisions affect others, observe how inclusion and exclusion operate, and begin to see how relationships and social structures shape people's lives.

These experiences can contribute to the development of social empathy by helping young people move beyond understanding another person in isolation toward understanding people within the contexts that surround them.

Why It Matters

We often focus on what we want young people to become.

More empathetic. More respectful. More responsible. More open to people whose experiences differ from their own.

But we also have to ask what they are learning from the environments surrounding them.

It is difficult to teach respectful dialogue in a setting where disagreement is routinely mocked. It is difficult to encourage perspective-taking where certain experiences are consistently dismissed. It is difficult to teach shared responsibility in environments where participation is symbolic rather than meaningful.

And it is difficult to cultivate social empathy if young people rarely experience communities in which different people are expected to listen to one another, contribute, and solve problems together.

This is why supportive environments matter.

They help establish the norms within which empathy is practiced. They can teach that disagreement does not require disrespect. That accountability and understanding can coexist. That difference does not prevent connection. And that being part of a community carries responsibilities toward other people.

Social empathy does not emerge from individual understanding alone. It requires opportunities to encounter difference, participate with others, understand experiences within their broader social context, and recognize that living in community carries responsibilities toward people beyond ourselves.

Supportive environments can provide those opportunities. When young people experience cultures where people are listened to, differences are approached with curiosity, participation is meaningful, and responsibility is shared, they are not only learning how to relate to another individual. They are learning how to understand and participate in a wider social world.

Putting Research Into Practice

Families, educators, youth organizations, workplaces, and communities can strengthen the environments they create by paying attention to everyday culture — not only formal rules or programs. They can:

- Model respectful disagreement rather than avoiding disagreement altogether.
- Establish clear and consistent expectations for how people treat one another.
- Create space for questions, uncertainty, and reflection.
- Respond to mistakes with both accountability and opportunities to repair harm.
- Invite people to contribute ideas, decisions, and solutions in meaningful ways.
- Examine whose perspectives are regularly centered and whose may be overlooked.
- Encourage cooperation around shared goals rather than competition alone.
- Make it safe to say, “I may not understand this yet.”
- Create opportunities to encounter experiences and viewpoints beyond one’s own.
- Help young people connect individual experiences to the broader circumstances that may shape them.
- Treat difference as an opportunity for learning rather than an obstacle to connection.
- Encourage curiosity before judgment and reflection before assumption.
- Reinforce the idea that participation in a community also carries responsibility toward others.

Supportive environments are not environments without conflict. They are environments where conflict, difference, and mistakes can be navigated in ways that preserve dignity, encourage learning, and strengthen understanding.

They are also environments where young people have opportunities to practice living with others - not only by being included, but by listening, contributing, considering context, sharing responsibility, and recognizing the experiences of people beyond themselves.

Key Takeaway

Empathy is shaped not only by what people are taught, but by what they repeatedly experience.

The cultures surrounding children and young people communicate powerful messages about whose voices matter, how disagreement is handled, whether participation is meaningful, and what responsibilities people have toward one another.

Supportive environments can reinforce the habits and capacities that empathy requires: listening, reflection, openness to different perspectives, cooperation, accountability, and care.

But their importance extends further.

Nurturing environments can help young people develop broader competencies of social empathy: understanding experiences within social context, engaging constructively across difference, participating in shared community life, and recognizing responsibility toward people beyond themselves.

In that sense, supportive environments are not simply beneficial to social empathy. They are part of the conditions that allow it to develop.

If we want young people to become capable of understanding not only another person, but also the communities and circumstances that shape people's lives, we have to pay attention to the environments in which that understanding is formed.

Questions for Reflection

- What are young people learning from the everyday culture of the environments around them?
- How do our families, schools, workplaces, and communities respond to disagreement, difference, and mistakes?
- What kinds of environments help young people develop not only empathy for individuals, but also a deeper understanding of the communities and social contexts around them?

“Every environment teaches something about how we are expected to understand, include, and live with one another.”

Research Foundation

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

Central question

How do the cultures, norms, relationships, and opportunities within supportive environments contribute to the development of empathy and the broader competencies of social empathy?

Research fields

Developmental Psychology · Education · Youth Development · School Climate · Social Psychology · Social-Emotional Development

Conceptual focus

Supportive Environments · Social Norms · School Climate · Empathy Development · Perspective-Taking · Participation · Shared Responsibility · Social Context · Social Empathy

Selected Research

Barr, J. J., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2007). Adolescent empathy and prosocial behavior in the multidimensional context of school culture. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 168(3), 231-250.

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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.