

Empathy Can Be Learned

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research increasingly suggests that empathy can be developed throughout life. Rather than being determined at birth, empathy grows through relationships, meaningful experiences, reflection, and supportive environments. This growing body of evidence reminds us that the way we interact with one another helps shape our ability to understand, connect with, and value others.



Overview

Can empathy be learned?

For many years, this question has been explored by researchers across developmental psychology, neuroscience, education, and social-emotional learning. While biology provides an important foundation for human development, research increasingly suggests that empathy is not simply something we are born with.

It develops over time through relationships, experiences, and the environments in which we live, learn, and interact with others. Rather than viewing empathy as an inborn quality that some people naturally possess more than others, research suggests that empathy-related capacities can continue developing throughout childhood, adolescence, and throughout life.

Like many human capacities, empathy develops through meaningful relationships, everyday experiences, and environments that encourage understanding and connection.

*“Empathy is not determined by birth alone.
It is shaped by how we grow throughout
life.”*

What the Research Tells Us

Across multiple fields of research, a consistent picture has emerged. Empathy develops progressively rather than all at once, shaped by the interactions and experiences that occur throughout childhood and adolescence.

Relationships with caregivers, emotional modeling, social learning, and supportive environments all contribute to this developmental process. Storytelling, respectful dialogue, cooperative learning, meaningful interaction with people from different backgrounds, civic engagement, and emotionally supportive environments all provide opportunities for young people to deepen perspective-taking and strengthen social understanding.

Taken together, these findings suggest that empathy is neither automatic nor unchangeable. It is a developmental capacity that grows through human connection, reflection, and meaningful participation in the lives of others.

Why It Matters

Understanding that empathy can be developed changes how we think about education, youth development, and community life.

It reminds us that empathy is not strengthened through information alone. It grows through experiences that encourage people to listen, reflect, cooperate, and understand perspectives beyond their own.

Recognizing that empathy can be learned offers a more hopeful perspective on human development. It also reminds us that each of us plays a role in creating the conditions where empathy can continue to grow.

As children move into adolescence, those same conditions become increasingly important. Young people begin to look beyond individual relationships and develop a broader understanding of the communities and environments around them. These experiences help lay the foundation for social empathy.

Putting Research Into Practice

Research suggests that empathy develops best when people have regular opportunities to practice it, reflect on it, and apply it in everyday life.

- Model empathy through everyday actions.
- Encourage perspective-taking through conversation and storytelling.
- Create opportunities for cooperation and shared problem-solving.
- Welcome respectful dialogue across different experiences and viewpoints.
- Build emotionally supportive environments where young people feel safe to connect, reflect, and grow.

Key Takeaway

The research offers an encouraging message.

If empathy can be learned, then we can intentionally create the conditions that allow social empathy to grow. Social empathy builds on empathy by broadening our ability to understand not only individual experiences, but also the broader social contexts and communities that shape people's lives.

By creating those conditions throughout childhood and adolescence, we prepare future generations to build stronger relationships, stronger communities, and a healthier democracy.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What experiences have helped shape your own ability to understand others?
- 2. How can families, schools, and communities create more opportunities for empathy to grow?
- 3. What is one everyday action that helps strengthen empathy in the people around you?

*“Stronger Relationships.
Stronger Communities.
A Healthier Democracy.”*

Research Foundation

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Understanding the Development of
Social Empathy in Youth

Developmental Focus
Childhood and adolescence

Research fields
Developmental psychology ·
Neuroscience
Education
Social-emotional learning

Central question
How social empathy develops and may
be strengthened

About the House of US Institute for Social Empathy

The House of US Institute for Social Empathy advances understanding of how empathy develops, how it shapes relationships and communities, and how it can be cultivated across generations. Through research, publications, and public education, the Institute translates evidence into practical knowledge that helps strengthen individuals, communities, and society.