

Children Learn Empathy by Watching Adults

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Children develop empathy not only through direct instruction, but also by observing how the adults around them interact with others. Everyday acts of kindness, respect, fairness, patience, and inclusion become powerful learning experiences that help shape children's own social and emotional development.



Overview

Empathy is often thought of as something we teach children by encouraging them to “be kind” or “put themselves in someone else’s shoes.” While those conversations are valuable, research suggests that one of the most powerful ways children develop empathy is by observing the people around them.

Everyday interactions—showing patience, listening respectfully, helping a neighbor, apologizing after making a mistake, or including someone who feels left out—provide children with real-life examples of how people treat one another. These seemingly ordinary moments become important opportunities for learning.

Children are not simply listening to what adults say. They are constantly observing what adults do.

“Children learn empathy by watching the adults around them.”

What the Research Tells Us

Research across developmental psychology, social learning theory, and empathy development suggests that children learn social and emotional behaviors through observation, relationships, and repeated everyday experiences.

Psychologist Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory demonstrated that children acquire many behaviors by watching others and observing the consequences of those behaviors. Later research has expanded this understanding, showing that empathy develops through a combination of biological predispositions, supportive relationships, emotional coaching, and opportunities to observe caring, respectful, and prosocial behavior.

Rather than emerging automatically, empathy is strengthened over time through repeated experiences within families, schools, and communities.

Why It Matters

Every adult plays a role in shaping the social environment children experience.

Parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, neighbors, volunteers, and community members all provide examples of how to respond to others.

When children consistently observe kindness, respect, fairness, patience, and inclusion, they gain more than knowledge about social behavior—they begin developing habits of mind and heart that influence how they interact with others throughout their lives.

This reminds us that cultivating empathy is not limited to formal lessons. It happens through the countless small interactions that make up everyday life.

Putting Research Into Practice

Research suggests that children benefit from seeing empathy demonstrated in authentic, everyday situations.

- Listen attentively when someone is speaking.
- Offer help without expecting anything in return.
- Treat service workers with kindness and respect.
- Welcome someone who may feel excluded.
- Acknowledge mistakes and offer sincere apologies.
- Speak respectfully about people with different backgrounds or perspectives.

Key Takeaway

Children learn far more from what we model than from what we merely teach.

Everyday acts of kindness, respect, patience, and inclusion help create the conditions in which empathy can grow. While no single interaction determines a child's development, the examples children observe day after day contribute to how they understand and relate to the people around them.

Cultivating social empathy begins not only with what we encourage children to do—but with what they see us do.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What behaviors are children observing in the adults around them each day?
- 2. How can families, schools, and communities intentionally create environments where empathy is modeled?
- 3. What is one everyday action you can take this week that demonstrates empathy to a child?

“Children are a reflection of the society we create.”

Selected Research Foundations

Albert Bandura
Social Learning Theory

Nancy Eisenberg
Prosocial Development

Martin Hoffman
Empathy Development

Daniel Goleman
Social and Emotional Intelligence

Elizabeth Segal
Social Empathy Framework

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.