



A CHILD AND ADOLESCENT
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives

Empathy: why it's so important and how to use it

Many of these children have had experience of neglect or abuse very early in their lives and this has meant they have difficulties both in recognising and coping with their feelings. This can make caring for such children very difficult both practically and emotionally. Responding to the child with empathy is a crucial tool to help the child change and to make your life as a carer easier.

What is empathy?

- The ability to tune in or imagine what another person's feelings might be in a particular situation
- Saying something to the child that shows that you are really listening and trying to understand their feelings



What will using it achieve?

- By letting the child know you understand and do not judge what a situation or experience might be like for them emotionally, you help the child feel connected to you and so help them feel safer and more secure
- It also helps the child learn about all the many different feelings that sometimes feel overwhelming. The child can then begin to be able to give the feeling a name and tell one from another
- It's the first step towards helping the child to deal with the feelings
- It's a great way of calming the child down in emotionally charged situations and can prevent things escalating



What it isn't!

Many people think they know what empathy means already but often are actually doing something slightly different. Here is a list of things that empathy **shouldn't** be:

- Giving reassurance - "you don't need to feel awful because..."
- Giving advice - "you could have done (something other than what the child did do)"
- A positive reframe - "well you've learned something the hard way but next time..."
- An explanation - "the other person will have meant/thought..." or "this has happened because"
- An opportunity to say "I told you so".
- Sympathy - "oh! you poor thing."
- An opportunity to join in - "Hearing what's happened to you makes me even more cross" (even more cross than the child appears to be)
- An invitation to have another feeling - "you shouldn't be upset, you should be glad about it"
- Venting your own feelings - "You sound really stressed. I'd like to give that crossing warden a piece of my mind"



How to give empathy

- Try to put yourself in the child's shoes and imagine how they might be feeling. A best guess is the place to start
- Say something short that expresses this "you seem a bit" and then leave some space for the child to talk or even not talk. Just **be** with them
- Be cautious - you can never be sure how another person feels. Something that makes you hopping mad may leave the child feeling confused or anxious. So **don't** say "you must feel...", **do** say "I wonder if you might be feeling..." "perhaps you may be..." "you look a bit..." " your face seems to say ..."
- Tone of voice and gesture are crucial in making the child feel listened to and really understood. Tone and gesture are sometimes enough
- Avoid asking direct questions such as "Are you feeling angry?" It's best to sound uncertain over what it might be. You're trying gently to make a connection to the child's feelings
- Talk about the child's feelings **not** your own. So not "If that happened to me I'd feel"

Empathy with no BUT on the end

- **DON'T ADD "but....."** All your good advice, explanations or reassurance can wait
- 'But' in a sentence has the effect of taking away the power of what's gone before it.
- Think about this "That's a lovely t-shirt you're wearing but it's not really your colour". Which bit of the sentence would have most impact on you?
- It's okay to say nothing after you have used your words of empathy - leaving space for the child to think and talk if they want to.
- **The important thing is that the child feels your connection to them**

So in summary, the way empathy feels to the child is:

- I am accepted - "It's ok with me for you to feel like this and I can handle it"
- My carer understands me - "the feeling you have is real and normal"
- My carer is there for me - "I'm listening to you and am happy to talk about it"

The other responses, though well intentioned, at this point will give other messages:

- Giving advice or explanation will give the message "you shouldn't feel the way you do"
- Giving reassurance or reframe will give the message "you don't really feel the way you do" or "I can't cope with your feelings either".
- Messages like 'I told you so' will feel like punishment
- Trying to cheer them up will give the message "Stop! Your feelings are too much for me to bear"

Afterwards, when the feeling has subsided, is the time to use all your other skills to help the child move forward. Then you can extend an invitation to talk more by asking if you can help, by offering choices of how to think about the experience or by providing reassuring consolation.

Empathy won't always work perfectly but it won't do any harm, if you get the tone right.

Empathy is a really hard skill, which takes lots and lots of practice.

Start with your nearest and dearest and try to get empathy in as often as possible with them so you build up your confidence.

Listen out for when you would have liked to receive it or when your best friend did it perfectly at just the right time!

It will take time for your child to get used to you responding in this way so don't be put off by an initial poor response. Keep on practising so that you get better and they get used to it

