The many benefits of empathy and why it matters for kids in a ‘me-first’ world

By Michele Borba, EdD

What do children need to be happy and successful? Hundreds of parents have asked me that question, and my response surprises most of them. “Empathy” is my answer. The trait that allows us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes may sound “touchy-feely,” but new research shows that empathy—rather than being a nice “add-on” to our kids’ development—is integral to their current and future success, happiness and well-being.

Empathy promotes kindness, prosocial behaviors and moral courage. It’s an effective antidote to bullying, aggression, prejudice and racism. It is also a positive predictor of kids’ reading and math scores and critical thinking skills. Empathy is core to everything that makes a society civilized and, above all, it makes our children better people.

Reasons for concern

In recent decades our children’s capacity to care has plummeted while self-absorption has skyrocketed. I call this new phase the “selfie syndrome.” It’s all about self promotion, personal branding and self-interest—at the exclusion of other people’s feelings, needs and concerns.

We see a measurable dip in empathy among today’s youth, and we can also observe a clear increase in peer cruelty. Experts observe more cheating and weaker moral reasoning in young people today. Sixty percent of adults surveyed believe that kids’ failure to learn moral values is a serious national problem.

In addition, our plugged-in high-pressure culture is leading to a youth mental health epidemic. Teen stress is now at higher levels than that reported by adults. As anxiety increases, empathy fades. It is hard to feel for others when you’re in “survival mode.”

What we can do to help

How can parents, teachers, counselors and child advocates turn this troubling trend around? Let’s start with emotional literacy, which is a key to unlocking empathy and the first of the nine habits that help children become...
Why empathy matters.
Continued from page 1...

and continue to be empathetic (see box on page 2).

The good news is that emotional intelligence is not a “gift.” It’s an ability that can be taught to children, starting as young as toddlers, and the seeds are planted even earlier by how we relate and respond to our infants.

Scientific findings in the past decade have shown us how much more babies and young children know about emotions that we ever envisioned. Studies have traced the roots of empathy to infancy—but around two is when our children begin to show genuine empathy for the first time. For example, younger babies cry when they see others in distress but a two-year-old will actually try to make things “all better.”

As children get older, they learn many new words to describe each emotion. But we need to understand that while language surely advances kids’ empathetic capability, simply having an emotional vocabulary does not assure that a child will care, share or comfort. Nurturance, modeling, positive real-life experiences and cognitive development are needed for empathy to blossom fully.

Understanding emotions
Children who can recognize, understand and express their emotions are healthier, more resilient and more popular. They do better at school and are more helpful.

But before kids can “step into someone else’s shoes,” they need to learn to read nonverbal cues: facial expressions, gestures, posture and voice tone: “She’s smiling... I’ll bet she’s happy.” “His body is slumped over...maybe he’s tired.”

Be your child’s emotion coach. Discuss and validate his or her observations and feelings. This sensitizes kids to others’ feelings and helps them take on another person’s perspective. Label emotions: “You’re happy!” “That made you proud.” Help kids reflect: “How did that make you feel?”

Gender differences
Most parents say they speak the same way to all of their kids, but experts disagree. When it comes to “emotions instructing,” girls are getting a far better deal. Moms discuss and explain feelings more with two-year-old daughters than with two-year-old sons.

And studies show that by age two and a half, girls are measurably more advanced than boys in reading facial expressions and body language.

We also use “emotion words” more frequently with four-year-old girls than boys. We discuss more experiences that are emotional with girls. “Did you see how happy Grandma was to see us?”

Somehow, we give children the idea that girls should be more sensitive and boys should learn to control their emotions. Talk more about emotions with your sons. Give them permission to show and convey their feelings.

One hint: boys are more likely to open up while doing something. So sit down with your son. Play a game, build Legos, exercise, talk back and forth about feelings.

Helpful strategies
Here’s what you can do to help kids learn more about emotions:

Observe a baby. Look at the face and body language of infants.

Find ways for kids to help. It could be caring for a younger child, tutoring a struggling student or raising a puppy. You can use this experience to open up new conversations about feelings.

Digital reality check

Staring at computer screens, texting, tweeting and IMing do not teach kids their “emotion ABC’s.”

Digital devices rob them of connecting with family members and developing empathy habits.

Face-to-face communication is the single best predictor of healthy emotional interactions. It is also the best way to learn emotions and develop human-contact skills.

Take a digital reality check. How much time is your family plugged in on a typical day? Is a digital “realignment” needed that would allow for more face-to-face connection? If so, plan it.

Set unplugged times. When its time to connect with your child, hit the Pause button on everything. Set and enforce the 4T rule: “No texting, tapping, talking on a cell or TV viewing when others talk or are present.”


See We Recommend, page 8.

The 9 essential habits of empathy

Empathetic children use nine particular habits to help them navigate the emotional mine fields and ethical challenges they will inevitably face throughout life. All nine are teachable and culled from the latest research in child development, neuroscience and social psychology.

Developing the four crucial fundamentals of empathy

EMOTIONAL LITERACY—so kids can recognize and understand the feelings and needs of others.

MORAL IDENTITY—so they will adopt caring values that guide their integrity and activate their empathy to help others.

PERSPECTIVE TAKING—so a child can step into another’s shoes to understand that person’s feelings, thoughts and views.

MORAL IMAGINATION—so kids can use literature, films and emotionally charged images as a source of inspiration to feel with others.

Helping children practice habits of empathy

SELF-REGULATION will help your child learn to manage strong emotions.

PRACTICING KINDNESS increases kids’ concern about the welfare and feelings of others.

COLLABORATION will help kids work with others to achieve shared goals.

Helping your child live empathetically

MORAL COURAGE emboldens her to speak out, step in and help others.

COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP ABILITIES motivate him to make a difference for others, no matter how small it may be.
Know stroke indicators and act F-A-S-T

If someone has a stroke, we all know that immediate medical help is essential and can save a life. I got an email recently with a new mnemonic device to help remember what to do if you think someone is having a stroke. It’s S-T-R plus T. It stands for Smile, Talk and Raise your arms plus a fourth indicator: Tongue. If you tell the person to stick out his or her tongue and it’s crooked, that can be a stroke indicator, too. Are you aware of this new information?

—E.K., San Francisco

We got that email, too, so we visited the American Stroke Association website at strokeassociation.org and found its suggestions to be even more specific and comprehensive. The Association says to look for these symptoms:

**F** stands for **Face**: Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop?

**A** stands for **Arms**: Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

**S** stands for **Speech**: Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Is their speech slurred or strange?

**T** stands for **Time**: If you observe any of these signs, call 9-1-1.

Whatever approach you prefer, FAST or STR-T, fast action can go a long way to reducing the damage from a stroke.

Really want to change? Try everything.

We often hear about behavioral studies that focus on a single variable, such as: What if I walked more? Ate blueberries every day? Got more sleep?

Researchers at the UC, Santa Barbara wanted to get beyond that minimalist approach. What if they could get a group of people to address all of their bad habits at once? For their study, which was published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, they put 31 college students through physical, cognitive and emotional tests and gave them brain scans.

About half of the participants served as a control group and continued their daily routines. The other half overhauled their lives completely. Every morning, they showed up for an hour of supervised stretching, resistance training and balance exercises. This was followed by an hour of training in mindfulness and stress reduction that included quiet walks and meditation.

Twice a week the students also completed interval-style endurance workouts on their own. They attended lectures about nutrition and sleep and kept journals detailing their exercise, diets, sleep patterns and moods.

After six weeks, the two groups of students took the original tests. Members of the control group showed no changes. But the students who committed to the new regimen were substantially stronger, fitter and more flexible. They performed better on tests of thinking, focus and working memory. They reported feeling happier and calmer and their self-esteem was higher. Brain scans even showed a pattern of activity that indicated an enhanced ability to focus.

Specific improvements—especially on measures of mood and stress reduction—exceeded greatly those measured in prior studies where subjects altered just one behavior. Dr. Michael Mrazek of the Center for Mindfulness & Human Potential at UC, Santa Barbara and the study’s lead author, suggested that one kind of change, like starting a new exercise regimen, may amplify the effects of another change such as taking up meditation.

Interestingly, the improvements continued after the study ended. The “change everything” students scored much higher than they originally had on measures of fitness, mood, thinking skill and well-being, though none of them were still exercising or meditating as much as they did during the experiment.

Bigger bottles may make for fatter babies

That’s the finding reported in the journal “Pediatrics.” It’s based on a new study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine.

For the study, pediatricians asked parents of new babies fed only infant formula to show them their baby bottles. Some held 2 ounces, others held 11 or more.

After controlling for other factors, researchers found that using a large bottle when the baby was 2 months old was associated with more rapid weight gain by the time babies were 6 months old.

Too rapid weight gain in infants is a predictor of later obesity. Using a smaller bottle could be an easy step to help ward off excess weight gain, says Dr. Eliana Perrin, lead author of the study.

A crying baby may not always be hungry, and babies who turn away from the bottle may be full. “Don’t force them to finish their bottles,” suggests Dr. Perrin.
Visiting a nursing home? Bring along a small gift.

If you visit someone in a nursing home resident regularly or once in a while, the question arises: Should I bring a gift? And, if so, what should it be?

The answer to the first question is “yes.” Under normal circumstances, it’s good to arrive with something in your hands. It will please your friend or relative and leave behind tangible proof that you were there.

But don’t think of it as a costly obligation. The best gifts are small ones that won’t add to the clutter. In her book The Nursing Home Connection, Anne Sharp suggests:

- **Think in terms of singles.** A pack of gum, roll of mints, crossword puzzle book or a new magazine. Reading material is a great gift that can be passed on for others to enjoy. Just avoid heavy volumes or thick hard-to-handle magazines if your loved one is frail. If he or she is visually impaired, find something with large print.

- **Keep it small.** It can be something that fits into a pocket or wallet such as a photo of your child or card with your name, phone numbers and email address written in your own handwriting. A single small photo of an event that just took place in your life can provide fuel for sharing and conversation.

- **Practical items used every day.** Nursing home residents can always use a new pen or pencil and some postage stamps. Other handy items include an inexpensive mirror to hang on the wall by the bed, a miniature hand mirror and a new toothbrush every few months.

- **Careful gift giving.** Visiting a nursing home? Bring along a small gift. But don’t think of it as a costly obligation. The best gifts are small ones that won’t add to the clutter. In her book The Nursing Home Connection, Anne Sharp suggests:

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What you can do to protect kids’ online privacy

What if your child posts or fills out online can wind up in the wrong hands. This can affect his or her future, safety and reputation. It sounds harsh, but it’s true.

Common Sense Media’s senior parenting editor Caroline Knorr explains why parents need to be concerned about kids’ online privacy and what we can do to help.

Your child could get hurt. Sharing one’s whereabouts on social media such as Twitter, Kik or Facebook reveals a child’s physical locations to strangers. Imagine a location-tagged selfie that says “Bored, by myself, hanging out looking for something fun to do.”

Your teenager could lose out on opportunities. Posting wild and crazy pics from a prom or party can paint a picture for potential admissions counselors and hiring managers, among others. They may not care about the party. It’s more about a kid’s poor judgment in posting compromising images.

Your child could be humiliated. Sharing fun stuff with friends is fine, but when a kid posts a sexy selfie, an explicit photo, an overly revealing rant or cruel comments about others, those posts can be shared widely. Talk to children about keeping private things private. We are all aware of embarrassing information that went public. Encourage teens to talk to their friends about respecting each other’s personal privacy.

A child’s identity could be stolen. Games played online save information about your child “in the cloud” (which is just a cool name for servers). For example, in the recent VTech data breach, hackers stole the email addresses, names, passwords and secret questions and answers of 6.4 million kids. Children are targeted because they have clean credit histories.

Safeguarding your child

“Let’s check out your new tablet’s privacy settings first.”

Your kid could get labeled. As schools automate procedures, they create student records that may contain sensitive information. In the wrong hands, a student’s individual education plan (IEP), disciplinary record or even a high body mass index could be used to unfairly disqualify your child from future opportunities.

You could get ripped off. Many schools also use software tools to teach, diagnose learning issues and interact with students. This provides another trove of personal information that potentially unscrupulous marketers would love to get their hands on.

What you can do to help

There are two kinds of online privacy. “Personal privacy” refers to your child’s online reputation. “Consumer privacy” refers to the information companies collect during online interactions and transactions. Both are important, and a few simple steps can help.

Use strict privacy settings. When your child gets a new device or signs up for a new website or app, establish privacy preferences. Follow the directions during setup or go to “settings” or to a section marked “privacy.”

Opt out of location-sharing and the ability of an app or website to post to social media sites such as Facebook on your behalf.

Encourage older kids to read the fine print before checking a box or entering an email address. Remind them to be aware of what information they are agreeing to share before they start using an app, a website or a device.

Teach kids to avoid giving away personal information. For younger children, that would include their home address, phone number and birth date.

Make sure your child follows the basics of good online behavior. It’s hard to take something back once it’s online—and texts and photos can be easily forwarded.

Check out COPPA (the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act) that prevents the collection of data from kids younger than 13 without parental consent.

Is your child sharing TMI?

Probe a bit to find out what your kids and their friends are sharing, but reserve judgment until you’ve heard them out. A heavy-handed approach often backfires. Make sure your kids are not feeling pressured to post things they’re uncomfortable with. And talk (often) about the risks of oversharing.

Check privacy settings. Even if kids do think before they post, if their privacy settings are not enabled (or are lax), they may be sharing more than they mean to.

What about posting photos?

Posting photos is a great way to stay in touch with family and friends, but it does create your child’s “digital footprint.” And once you post a photo, you lose control over it. Someone could copy it, tag it, save it or use it—and you might never know.

To minimize intrusions, set privacy settings, limit the audience of a post (to family, for example), turn off your GPS, consider using a nickname for your children, and try using photo-sharing sites such as Picasa and Flickr that require users to log in to see pictures.

Best privacy settings for computers and smartphones

Be aware that your computer’s “cookies” track your movements. Some cookies are okay, some are not. Look at the privacy settings in your browser (usually in the Tools menu) to see whether you can fine-tune cookies to keep the good and block out the bad.

Tighten up privacy settings on smartphones. Again, be sure to turn off services that allow apps to track your location. Don’t let apps share your data such as the contact list on your phone. Say no.

Be careful about logins. For example, when you log onto a site with your Facebook or Google username and password, you may be allowing that app to access certain information from your profile. It’s a chore, of course, but do read the fine print so you’ll know what you’re sharing.
Finding focus in a world of constant communication

Ringing, ping, beep, buzz. It’s the siren call of electronic devices that we have come to accept as our “new normal,” and it’s a wonderful world in many ways.

A tsunami of information is available with a quick click. We can reach out instantly to family members, friends and colleagues near and far. But on the job, this can have a real impact on our productivity. At the end of a day, many of us feel like we worked hard but didn’t get as much done as we’d like.

“Time that should be spent doing work is being lost getting back to work,” says business writer James Krohe, Jr. “Seconds and minutes are bled away by distractions and interruptions.”

Granted, we’ve gotten better at quickly clicking on URLs and wiring our thoughts with bells and whistles. But we may be losing the attentional skills that we need to thrive in our complex world: focusing, reasoning, deep learning and problem-solving.

It’s a common challenge

The bombardment of IMs, phone calls, emails and in-person interruptions can be frustrating. But if you’re doing a job that involves waiting on customers or responding to an emergency, being present and “on call” comes with the territory. Even so, most of us—if we really try—could do a lot to manage and minimize workplace distractions. Career coach Chrissy Scivicque suggests:

Plan for it. If you work with other human beings, chances are high that you will be interrupted on a fairly regular basis. That’s just how it goes. It’s not that people want to throw you off your carefully planned day. Some interruptions are important and unavoidable. And no matter what your job is, there will be times when your assistance, knowledge or presence will be required unexpectedly. The point is: stop being surprised by it. Factor it in.

When you set timelines, negotiate deadlines or simply outline your day, recognize that you will likely be thrown off course a few times. Give yourself some leeway. Don’t schedule yourself so tight that you have no wiggle room.

Take control. Don’t expect other people to protect your time. Take matters into your own hands and come up with a system that works for you and for the people with whom you work.

For example: if the nature of your work allows it, turn off your instant messenger. Set your phone to go straight to voicemail. For most of us, there is no reason to be at the mercy of everyone all of the time. Just be sure to check in regularly and get back as soon as you can to people who are trying to reach you.

Don’t be afraid to use some kind of “do not disturb” sign. It sounds a bit awkward, but if you really need to focus your attention on a project, it’s OK to signal that to others. Of course, you can’t keep a “do not disturb” sign up all day long. You’ll also need to make yourself available—if possible, on your own terms.

When you communicate your new system to others, you may be pleasantly surprised by how well it will be respected. In fact, this is the kind of approach that can catch on. When one person starts it, others may try to implement something similar for themselves.

Don’t initiate. This may go without saying, but we’ll say it anyway: If you don’t want people to interrupt you, don’t interrupt them.

Show respect for others by asking, “Is now a good time to talk?” before simply launching into a conversation.

Be a role model for the kind of behavior you would like to see from others. Don’t ping coworkers on IM with pointless chitchat if you don’t want them to do the same to you. Let your coworkers know how you want to interact with them simply by demonstrating the behavior.

Hide. Sometimes the easiest way to avoid interruptions is to hide from them. If you have a private office, that’s a lot easier to do. But even if your desk is out in the open or you work in a cubicle, try to position yourself in a way that blocks you from view of most foot traffic.

Check out Japanese inspired partial wall designs as well. They are light enough to move around for “open” hours and inexpensive for the amount of peace they provide.

Another approach is to physically pick up your work and head to a quiet spot. Perhaps there’s an empty conference room or a library if you can use. If it’s absolutely impossible to get some quiet time at your workplace, you may be able to negotiate an occasional day or half-day outside the office. Often, just a few hours of focused time can result in more work accomplished than days of interrupted time.

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**What’s up with the Information Overload Research Group**

The nonprofit Information Overload Research Group is dedicated to reducing the impact of “information pollution” and overload—a growing problem in our high-tech society that can diminish the productivity and quality of life of workers around the world.

The organization’s website—<http://iorgforum.org>—contains scholarly articles by researchers on subjects such as email overload and workplace distractions and interruptions. It has a chat room for discussing topics like how to help students handle the plethora of information on social media sites. There’s also a video lecture on “Rhythms of Attention, Focus and Mood with Digital Activity” by Gloria Mark, a psychologist at the University of California, Irvine and a leading research on all topics related to attention.

This includes an interesting discussion of constant connectivity:

“We’re hardwired to be monochronic—to do tasks from start to finish,” says Dr. Mark, “but we live in a digital age that requires us to be polychronic—to switch from one task to another.”

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WFL September 2016 ♦ www.workandfamilylife.com
Quick ‘snacks’ may be packed with carbs, fat

It’s not just high-calorie restaurant meals that can spell trouble for one’s diet. The quick “snacks” so many of us enjoy may be packed with carbs or fat or even both.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) provided the following calorie counts in a recent issue of its Nutrition Action Healthletter:

- Starbucks Tiramisu Latte (venti, 20 oz.), 390 calories.
- Auntie Anne’s Sweet Almond Soft Pretzel, 390 calories.
- Starbucks Banana Nut Bread (one slice), 420 calories.
- Pinkberry Chocolate Hazelnut Frozen Yogurt (large, 13 oz.), 520 calories.
- Panera Bread Pumpkin Muffin, 590 calories.
- Jamba Juice Amazing Greens Smoothie (28 oz.), 610 calories.
- Cold Stone Creamery Very Vanilla Shake (20 oz.), 1,210 calories.
- Five Guys Fries (large), 1,310 calories.

A few suggestions if you are dieting

If you are trying to shed a few pounds, here are some tips from the CSPI:

- **Start by cutting** unhealthy carbohydrates that most of us tend to overdo—especially added sugars and white flour.
- **Cut carbs**, fat, portion size or anything else that will reduce calorie consumption.
- **Get the most** of your carbs from fresh or frozen fruit or vegetables.
- **Pick a diet** that you enjoy and are able to stick to for the long haul.

Are you buying meds on the Internet?

In an effort to cut costs, about 1.9 million Americans are now buying meds from Internet sites, according to the Consumer Reports National Research Center.

Are online drug bargains a good or a bad deal? They can be both. Here’s what we have learned.

**Online drug dangers**

- **Most of the Internet sites** selling prescription drugs are not legitimate, according to the FDA. Last year, the agency took action against more than 1,050 websites, seizing products sold fraudulently as FDA-approved prescription drugs and medical devices.
- **Rogue pharmacies sell drugs** that are counterfeit or poorly made, according to the Government Accountability Office. Meds sold through websites have been found to contain too much or too little of a drug’s active ingredient. Some have been found to contain dangerous, even life-threatening, contaminants.
- **Ordering from a rogue site** may put your personal and financial information at risk. You may be inundated with spam email or pharmacist available to answer questions, and is within the U.S.
- **Stick with websites** of the drugstores you already know and trust such as those connected with chain stores, big-box stores and local mom-and-pop pharmacies.

**Check out safer strategies**

- **Look for “.pharmacy”** at the end of the web address. That indicates the site is licensed and has been verified by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy.
- **Look for the VIPPS seal** from the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites program. And for a list of accredited sites, go to nabp.net.
- **You can also save money** on prescriptions without going online. Many stores offer discounted generic drugs and some offer loyalty program discounts to members.

**What about Canada?**

- **Many consumers** feel safer when they order from a Canadian website, because Canada’s laws governing the sale of drugs are similar to those in the U.S. But “Best Buy Drugs” experts at Consumer Reports say that Internet pharmacies claiming to be Canadian very often are not. “Most are fake storefronts selling low-quality products from Third World countries,” says Carmen Caizone of the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy.

Q&A on health and wellness

**Q** How often should I have my vision checked?
**A** If you’re not having vision problems and have no risk factors for them (such as a family history of type 2 diabetes), doctors recommend a comprehensive eye evaluation at age 40; every 2-4 years until age 55; every 1-3 years between 55 and 64; and every year or two after age 65. The exam should be performed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist. If you notice a specific eye problem, see your eye doctor sooner.

**Q** Is it true that talcum powder can cause ovarian cancer?
**A** A study at Boston’s Brigham and Women’s Hospital found an association between the use of talcum powder on skin near the genitals and ovarian cancer. “There is some suggestion of a possible increase in ovarian cancer risk,” says the American Cancer Society. “Until we have definitive answers, women should refrain from sprinkling talc in their underwear or on pads or tampons. Consider cornstarch instead. Just be aware that if you have diabetes, cornstarch can increase your fungal infection risk.

**Q** Where are we now on egg consumption?
**A** Relatively high intake of dietary cholesterol is not associated with an increased risk of coronary artery disease, according to a Finnish study that followed more than 1,000 healthy middle-aged people for 21 years. On average, the participants consumed an egg a day, which contributed about half of their cholesterol intake. The research was reported in the “American Journal of Clinical Nutrition.”
How adults can cultivate empathy in children

Eight year olds in Armenia play chess to stretch their perspective-taking skills. In Long Beach, California, at-risk teens make videos of hospice patients to help their families preserve memories. Third graders in Canada use babies to learn about emotional literacy.

These are examples of ways to teach empathy, the quality author Michele Borba, EdD says plays a crucial role in predicting kids’ happiness and success. While our kids are wired to care, she says, empathy is not an inborn trait. It’s a talent that kids can cultivate and improve like riding a bike or learning a foreign language.

In her wonderful new book, *UnSelfie*, Dr. Borba explains how to impart this skill to children. Nine essential habits of empathy, such as emotional literacy, perspective taking, collaboration and moral courage (full list on page 2 of front page article) provide the framework for her advice.

Each chapter is based on one of the nine habits. The author discusses in detail the importance of each trait and provides concrete advice on how to encourage it in children.

For example, in the chapter “Empathetic Children Understand the Needs of Others,” Dr. Borba says that perspective taking, the ability to understand another person’s thoughts, feelings, wants and needs, is the gateway to empathy and a “habit children need for every part of life—from handling playground disputes to mastering boardroom debates.”

Modeling empathy while simultaneously setting limits is difficult. Dr. Borba suggests using discipline techniques that encourage rather than discourage empathy. For example: focusing attention on the effect of a child’s behavior on another person boosts perspective taking.

Each chapter includes age-by-age strategies to implement one of the habits of empathy.

This is a remarkably comprehensive discussion of an important topic, and that alone makes it a very important book for all parents to read.