Empathy: The greatest of skills to impart on the generation to come

Wednesday 5 August, 2020

Press Release

London, 4th
August 2020

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Explaining the impact and reality of Covid19 to my three-year-old daughter, repeatedly, for the last four months has been a constant lesson in empathy. Eighteen weeks later her questions now centre around people's safety, what the doctors are doing (where do they eat lunch mummy? Do they also have a bedtime story after they help people?) versus when she can go to nursery again and fulfil her own needs. In the end, her natural empathetic compass has taken-over her toddler universe, which in all other scenarios is far more likely to be driven by playtime or a brand-new toy!

Empathy is our capacity to take on the perspective of another and to figuratively walk in their shoes. It is something, that as parents, we often do naturally as we teach our children to navigate the world. We talk about "not hurting the feelings" of another, or we ask them to "imagine how daddy feels when you do that?" We encourage our children to understand the context of others almost daily, but is teaching empathy at home enough?

Given empathy is an innate skill we are all born with, and that it is a skill that improves as we practice and use it, should empathy be part of our nursery and school curriculum? Are our teachers helping to create the strongest forms of empathetic community mindedness, motivation and self-awareness?

Empathy teaches our children to learn to understand each other and to build friendship based on trust and mutual connection. It allows them to comprehend the festivals, realities and family structures of those unlike themselves, and to forge forward as united groups of individuals. It creates patience, perspective and depth of relationships, and it prepares children to consider others alongside themselves as they grow and venture into the world. There is also evidence that empathetic classrooms and school cultures can be key to preventing or reducing bullying and other forms of unkind behaviour amongst children.

As parents we spend so many of the early years trying to explain to our children why they need to share, why they should not hit others or why the cat doesn't like to be pulled by the tail! These are all fundamentally more easily understood in a basis of empathy. Seeking to understand is at the core of what we are trying to teach these tiny citizens of the world. As a mum, there is nothing I would be more grateful for than teachers who teach my little girl to understand that the world seen through the eyes of others is a more vibrant, fairer, and a more balanced world for us all to share.

Four guideposts for cultivating empathy with our children

1. **Practice what you preach**

It goes without saying that we should try to practice what we preach and use empathy with our children as a basis for cultivating this type of behaviour. The best way for them to learn empathy is to watch and experience us using it. They trust us and they form attachments with how we parent so if we parent empathetically, they are far more likely to naturally behave empathetically. Plus, we know that when children feel understood and listened to, they are better able to explain what they need, more motivated to learn and engage, and less frustrated. Empathy is at the heart of what it means to be human and creating deep connection between us and our children is the best form of developing more empathy into the world around us.

2. **Consider the power of your words**

Language is so key to helping children see things differently – simply re-framing a question can unlock a whole host of thinking that might otherwise have been missed. The question "can you help me

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understand how you see this?" is a great question for us to have in mind for melt downs, disagreements, or tantrums. It holds two critical empathetic lenses. Firstly, it shows our children that we practice empathy towards them; that we aim to understand, and to try and see things as they do. Secondly, it becomes part of the child's habitual response system so that the next time they are in a disagreement or awkward situation with other children, their first instinct is to ask that child to also help explain how they see the reality or context.

3. Ask, don't tell.

This is a key part of all empathetic communication. It is really important that children frequently get asked how they feel so that they are empowered to share their own feelings. We cannot expect them to empathise with others if we don't allow them the same opportunity. Replacing saying things like "I know how you feel" with "I imagine you feel like this, am I right?" will encourage the child to open up and to share, whilst accessing their subconscious more often and finding ways to explain the real root cause.

4. **Exercise gratitude**

Gratitude is such a trendy word now that it gets thrown around a lot but teaching our children gratitude as a context for understanding others is extremely powerful. For example, the simple act of allowing your child to imagine how their caregiver feels at the end of a day will encourage the children to see the caregiver not only as their "grandma" or "nanny" who looks after them, but as an individual with their own needs and feelings that we can be cognizant of. Giving our children the opportunity to practice empathy will allow them to form a natural reflex and, in time, they will become better and better at tuning into those around them instinctively.

Showing empathy towards our children pulls us closer together as a family unit, it allows us to teach them "you are not alone and I want to understand how this feels to you" and it is a phenomenal tool to help us understand what is behind certain behaviours. It also inspires our children to practice more empathy themselves. For young children, this skillset can be hard to understand and difficult to master, so it will be a work in progress throughout most of childhood. The distinction between self and others matures quickly though and as it does, empathy will follow. For example, if a one-year-old sees that a friend is upset he may go get his own mother to comfort him. A two-and-a-half-year-old in the same situation may get his friend's mother because he now understands that his friend would want his own parent in a time of distress.

Responding with empathy as parents takes practice and patience but making small changes in our own approach can help our children form big changes in the way they engage with the human beings they are to meet in the years ahead.

*- **Mimi Nicklin** is author of **'Softening The Edge'** and presenter of **Empathy for Breakfast** with over 70,000 views of the show so far.*

For more information, and regular updates, go to www.miminicklin.com or follow Mimi on social media: @MimiNicklin.

To tune into Empathy for Breakfast, click here.

Softening The Edge available for pre-order now and due for release in September. Get in touch for a copy.

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About Mimi Nicklin:

Mimi Nicklin is an experienced marketer and communications specialist, and a well-known empathetic leader. For over fourteen years she has been working across the globe with her clients to drive stand-out creative interventions that lead to business and culture change. Driven by the pursuit of bringing conscientiousness to the role and with a desire to make the world of work a more empathetic, valuable and sustainably healthy place to be, Mimi is currently working on her first book to be published later this year – Softening The Edge. Having lived and worked in London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Dubai, Mimi's uniquely global perspective impacts organisations from the inside out, focusing on cultural, behavioural and mindset change. Currently based in Dubai, she is a natural coach, writer and creative mind, and has held roles as diverse as Strategic Director, Vice President and Creative Officer in some of the world's leading advertising agencies. Mimi's passion for balancing humanism with

capitalism, drives her commitment to leading the practice of conscientious and empathetic leadership, and her ‘principles of people’, into organisations worldwide.

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