

# Teaching Empathy: Essential for Students, Crucial for Humanity

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Empathy is the key to encouraging prosocial behavior, limiting aggression, and diminishing social prejudice in our world. “To empathize is to civilize,” says Jeremy Rifkin, social theorist and author of the book, [The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis](#). And, here in [his TED Talk -- The Empathic Civilization](#) -- Rifkin reimagines our world as a place where we cultivate enough empathy to see earth and all its residents as one large social unit. He argues that this is the opposite of a Utopian notion, and yet, it does seem quite idealistic, particularly as it is in contrast to our current mainstream model of schooling where character education and social emotional learning take a back seat to testing.

*“Part of our formal education should be training in empathy. Imagine how different the world would be if, in fact, it were 'reading, writing, arithmetic, empathy.’”*

*- Neil deGrasse Tyson*

Education expert [Dr. Michele Borba](#), a proponent of empathy in education, has written a book on the topic called [UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World](#). While she believes

teaching children character has value for the sake of our future society, she also thinks that perhaps pitching it as a tool for success might be one way to get it back into our school systems. “We are such a trophy-, SAT-obsessed society, but if parents would recognize the value [for success] beyond the humanness, civility and ethics, they might get it.” She adds, “It needs to be woven in curriculum, not tacked on.”

The [research shows](#) that higher levels of empathy make people more productive in cooperative learning and work environments, and empathy education has even been proven to boost traditional academic success as well. Future leaders in business, politics, art, and beyond will need emotional intelligence to participate meaningfully and relate to others in an increasingly complex world.

Studies, like this one of [secondary school students](#), shows a simple and straightforward connection between empathy indicators in children and grade point average. One [particularly interesting study](#) noted the effects of empathy on comprehension in reading, literature and social studies. “The empathic child is better able to place him- or herself in the role of central characters portrayed in the fictional and historical readings. In addition to being better able to understand the roles and perspectives of these fictional and historical characters, the empathic child is better able to share and experience, to some degree, their feelings. These shared feelings may serve to underline and reinforce what they have read and been taught, resulting in better recall. (Budin, 2001; Cress & Holm, 2000).”

Educating children in, and with, empathy also has a direct effect on their behavior and motivation. [Studying student behavior](#) in schools that focus on fostering empathetic school communities have found that: “Students in high-community schools are more likely to become thoughtful and reflective, to be self-directing, but also to accept the authority of others, to be concerned for and respectful of others, to avoid courses of action that are harmful to themselves or others, and to maintain higher standards of ethical conduct.”

It’s not surprising then that empathetic students do better after their schooling as well. The [authors of Emotional Intelligence 2.0](#), Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, found people with high emotional intelligence and empathy (which they call EQ) made an average of \$29,000 more each year and they also attributed EQ to having a 58% influence over job performance.

Yale has a [Center for Emotional Intelligence](#) and provides an overview of the field in their publication, [The Science of Emotional Intelligence](#). Yale scientists found that empathy is half the emotional intelligence equation -- “a set of four related abilities: *perceiving*, *using*, *understanding*, and *managing* emotions. Emotional intelligence predicts success in important domains, among them personal and work relationships.”

So, the [WHY of empathy](#) in education is pretty clear here in the 21st century. What about the HOW?

### **How to Cultivate Empathy for the Sake of Learning**

Science increasingly suggests that empathy is a skill that [can be learned](#) and mastered,

and we are gaining a better understanding of how to teach it in the classroom. A [meta analysis of over 18 empathy training programs](#) found that empathy training is effective.

There are many types of for- and non-profit empathy training initiatives available for schools, but educators can foster, cultivate, and teach empathy in their communities and classrooms by keeping these three principles top of mind.

### ***Focus on a Child's Emotional World***

[Emotions are a key player in motivation and learning.](#) Emotions and emotional intelligence play such a large role in achievement because emotional well-being primes students to learn and eliminates potent emotional distractions - anxiety, fear, jealousy, anger - that interfere with learning.

In Waldorf Education, special attention is given to the child's whole being -- head, heart, and hands -- with the heart being the emotional core. Learning self-regulation, listening skills, empathy, patience, and kindness toward others paves the way for intrinsic motivation and cooperative learning.

### ***Use Story to Foster Empathy***

Children who are encouraged to use their imaginations have the ability to place themselves into story, literature, and history lessons. Inquiry-based learning helps students adopt and emotionally connect to their lessons. What would it feel like to live during the Middle Ages without doctors or plumbing or schools? How would you feel about an arranged marriage at age 13? How did our character feel about it? The more students understand the influences their experiences have on their own mindsets, the more they can empathize about others' experiences and mindsets in past and in current day settings.

### ***Actively Model Empathy***

[Positive teacher and student relationships](#) are a key ingredient to student success. Waldorf Educators are particularly poised to take advantage of this dynamic, since they stay with students through multiple grades. Therefore, it becomes even more essential to model empathy and understanding for all students within the classroom community.

Genuinely caring for students, understanding their home life and backgrounds, believing in their potential, engaging in non-authoritarian discipline styles, and customizing one-on-one teaching when possible are all examples of empathetic leadership skills in the classroom community.

By teaching students empathy in an authentic way, we will not only see direct benefits in the classroom community, school community and student achievement, but we will ultimately help foster a better world -- one that social theorists and philosophers believe is essential to thriving as a global community.