Character Education Lesson

Empathy

Objective

Students will understand the following:
1. What empathy is and why it is important.
2. How to look for cues in facial expressions and body language to understand how others feel.
3. How to “put yourself in someone else’s shoes”

Grade Level

Grades K-4.

Standards

Supports learning standards in social studies and health.
1. Students understand the individual responsibilities of citizenship and promoting a civil society.
2. Students demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health and to create positive personal relationships.

Materials

1. *What If?, Book 3 Talking with Trees Series* (print or ebook)
2. Empathy worksheets

Vocabulary

Empathy- The ability to understand how someone else is feeling. Empathy has two parts:
1. Shared emotion – when you feel an emotion with someone else, even though you aren’t in the same situation
2. Understanding other perspectives- understanding how someone else might see a situation (their perspective) even if you think differently about it. We call this being able to “put yourself in someone else’s shoes.”
Procedures

1. Define Empathy

Explain what empathy is using the definitions in the vocabulary section above. Ask children to describe a time when they have felt empathy. For example:

- If they have felt sad or excited when a friend felt sad or excited, even though they weren’t affected by whatever caused their friend to feel that way. (Such as being sad with your friend that he/she didn’t make the soccer team or being excited for your friend when she got a new toy she had been wanting.)
- If they ever hurt themselves and their mom said, “I’m sorry”, even though it’s not her fault they got hurt. The mom is really saying “I feel bad that you are feeling bad,” which is showing empathy.
- See the What is Empathy? Page for more examples

2. Talk about why empathy is important

Empathy is important because it helps us get along with other people. It’s the basis of all healthy relationships because we are able to understand how others are feeling and how our actions might impact them. It’s important for relationships with friends and family, but also for working well with teams, and succeeding in a job. Empathy is important to our whole society because it helps us cooperate and live peacefully with others. It helps us understand how people see situations differently so we can treat each other with courtesy and find compromises.

One way to see how empathy is important is to consider what life would be like if nobody cared how you felt about anything. What if everyone just said and did whatever they wanted, without caring how it would impact others?

3. Talk about strategies for building empathy

Empathy has two parts: feeling someone’s emotions and understanding their perspective.

Feeling someone’s emotions- Practice predicting how someone is feeling using the cues that the faces and bodies give you. Either read (or project on the whiteboard) the book “What if” (or use the Predicting Emotions Empathy Worksheet.) Ask the students to describe how the people in each illustration might be feeling. Point out facial cues (raised/lowered eyebrows, smile/frown, eyes open/squinted) and body cues (pointing, hands on hips, tilted head) that can help you tell how someone is feeling.

Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes- In each scenario in the book, or using the “Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” Worksheet, discuss how each person feels in the same situation. Some students may identify with one character more than the other. Have them “trade places” and tell how the character they don’t identify with may be feeling.

- Discuss each situation from both parties’ perspectives and point how they are different. (For example, the boy who is pointing and joking about his friend’s haircut thinks he is just being funny. The boy being pointed out
- Discuss how each situation could have turned out differently if the children had considered how the other person might feel. (For example, if the girl had thought about how her mom would feel before she left messy footprints in the living room, they might have enjoyed eating the berries together instead of unhappily cleaning up the mess.)

Supporting Activities
- Have the children draw a picture of a time when they showed someone empathy. The "Ways to show empathy" Worksheet can help.
- Try some of our other books and Predicting Emotions Worksheets and PowerPoints for a wider range of examples.
- Print an Empathy Poster

More resources to extend the lesson

Browse our "best of the web" character education resources list for more activities, games, songs, and videos that teach empathy.