

Why Empathy Really Matters

Why it's important to not only show empathy for your children to see, but express it toward one another to help strengthen your marriage.

BY LISA BROOKES KIFT, MFT

When I do marriage counseling, I initially assess the levels of emotional safety between the couple, which, for me, is an umbrella term indicating the security of the attachment between them. I consider specific aspects of emotional safety to include feeling heard, validated, accepted, loved and others. But one of *the most* important aspects of creating emotional safety is empathy.

Empathy is the ability to identify with another's feelings, to really get to know how the other might feel. Because the bonds of healthy attachment in the parent-child relationships sets the stage for trust and empathy in relationships later on, many people don't necessarily have those skills, however, couples can learn and practice them. It is also important that they provide the modeling necessary to pass empathy down to the generations that follow. Although children are born with the capacity for empathy, it must be modeled by the parents or risk not being developed.

According to child expert, Dr Michele Borba, we are facing an "empathy crisis." One of the reasons she cites is the emotional unavailability of parents. She says, "The emotional availability of parents is diminishing for a number of reasons, including parental illness, death, work, fatigue, and divorce. Whatever the cause, critical empathy-building moments for kids are being lost as well."

A recent study by researchers at the U-M Institute for Social Research, indicated a drop in empathy amongst college students. This coupled with the rash of recent teen suicides as a result of bullying at the hands of kids and teens is alarming. Many of us mental-health professionals are starting to wonder whether more kids are also now lacking empathy as demonstrated by their ability to engage in egregious behavior and apparently think nothing wrong with it. Teen expert, Annie Fox, wonders if "broken kids are breaking all of us."

The lessons of empathy begin with the parents. This is why it's critical that couples who struggle with empathy themselves learn these skills together. Not only will they strengthen the foundation of their relationship, but the foundation of the family.

Is empathy lacking in your marriage? Here are two ways to work on building empathy:

1. Learn and practice active listening skills. This is a slowed down form of communication allowing for hearing, validating and empathizing with each other more effectively.
2. Get familiar with your own family of origin wounds that might block you from empathy. These wounds can be a result of many things including: physical and/or emotional abuse, harsh parenting styles, dismissive parenting styles, living in a fear-based environment, or being witness to a volatile or high-conflict relationship between your parents. If you weren't shown empathy as a child, you may struggle with providing it now as an adult and husband or wife.

The most important thing is that we as a society don't lose sight of the importance of empathy. Unfortunately, we are being reminded of what an absence of empathy can look like. Whether or not you have children, empathy is an integral part to the emotional safety between you and your spouse. If you do have children, it's important not only to the marriage, but imperative that you model this behavior for your children to help raise a more emotionally connected and caring next generation.

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