

WORK & FAMILY LIFE

BALANCING JOB AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

MARCH 2014
VOL. 29, NO. 3

Practical solutions
for family, workplace
and health issues

WHAT'S INSIDE

ELDER ISSUES

Does your older relative
need home repairs?

4

PARENTING

Staying close to home
while you're away

5

ON THE JOB

Think like a child...and
act like an adult

6

A HEALTHY YOU

To build strong bones,
it's best to start early

7

INTERCHANGE

Unleashing the talent
of older workers

3

RESEARCH REVIEW

Tips to help you keep
those resolutions

3

WE RECOMMEND

Focusing on the family,
not just on the kids

8

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"Your friend was so upset about losing her backpack. It was very kind of you to help her find it."

Yes, we can teach empathy to children

By Melinda Blau and Tracy Hogg

Simply put, empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. It's related to love, in that we (theoretically and ideally) have the deepest empathy for the ones we love the most. But if you have ever been at the scene of an accident or a natural disaster—or even watched the news on TV, you know that you can also feel empathy for total strangers.

Empathy is part instinct and part learning—and we could not have survived as a species without it. Because humans are helpless at birth, we need older humans to care for us. Empathy is the foundation on which connection is built. It is a complex interplay of observation, thinking, memory, knowledge and reasoning—all of which combine to give you, as one definition puts it, "insight into the thoughts and feelings of others."

Putting our empathy into action

When we feel empathy, it allows us to gauge where another person is, and this makes it easier to dial down arguments and resolve disagreements. In a family, empathy enables individuals to be more patient and understanding. If you are empathetic, you are less likely to overreact or take it person-

ally when a family member says or does something you don't like or expect. You are more likely to cooperate when you "get" where another person is "coming from."

Some of us are naturally more empathetic than others. It's partly in our genes and partly how we were raised and what we were taught. In terms of our own kids though, the good news is that we—and they—can practice and get better at empathy.

Be a role model

Of course, we can all be insensitive and unkind at times. It's important to recognize that and to ask ourselves why. Were we having a bad day? Did the situation evoke feelings from our past? Or do we just need to work harder at being a better role model?

For example, your son is in tears because he didn't get into the orchestra. You may think it's unfair too, because he practiced so hard. Or you may over-identify with him because you had a similar experience when you were his age. Or perhaps your tween daughter has two basic moods—weepy and snippy. And now something's happened and you're hearing a blast of surly backtalk.

Continued on page 2...

Empathy...

Continued from page 1

You could give her the “you can’t talk to me like that” speech, which would probably make things worse. Or you could take a deep breath and consider the bigger picture. You might also ask yourself if you really want to impose rules at this moment. Would it be better to just slow down long enough to imagine yourself in your daughter’s shoes?

A value taught and learned

It’s not enough to leave empathy to chance. It needs to be taught to our children and practiced by the entire family.

Expose kids to situations in your community where they can be of help such as participating in a food drive, baking or donating to a charity event or collecting money for UNICEF.

Comment favorably when a character on TV or someone in the news shows empathy. Say how pleased your neighbor was when you remarked how well she looked after her operation. Stick up for the underdog.

Let kids hear you thank people for services they have provided. When you learn about the death of a relative or a community member, suggest that your family create a condolence card together.

Bring empathy into your daily conversations. For example: “That was nice of you to notice that your brother was having trouble and help him.” Or “We’ve all made that mistake before. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Kids’ journey to empathy

BABIES AND TODDLERS (0–2)

Where they might be. Infants make eye contact and respond to human faces, which helps them elicit empathy from caregivers. At around 18 months, they recognize distress in others and form attachments to toys, blankets and other security objects.

What you can do. Kids need to build trust in their environment. Show them they’re in a safe place.



“We missed you at soccer practice today. Get well soon!”

Talk to them, sing and dance. Explain what they’re seeing, even if they can’t understand it yet.

Start conversations about how other people feel. Show young children what emotions look like by pointing out happy or sad faces in books and other media.

PRESCHOOLERS (3–4)

Where they might be. Children this age have fewer emotional outbursts, greater control and more tolerance of frustration. They are able to wait for a cookie, understand right from wrong and play on their own. They also have a beginning sense of self, but their self-image is mostly based on what other people think of them.

Young children can understand more than they are able to express. They want to please but,

at the same time, they don’t have a strong sense that other people have different perspectives.

What you can do. Don’t reward whining or tantrums. Keep teaching basic manners. A lot of what you show children at this age will become automatic.

Role-play all kinds of real and imagined situations with them. If your child hits someone, talk about how the other child felt.

Work on impulse control and the need for immediate gratification. Play games that require patience and waiting. Use books and visual media to talk about caring.

“Catch” kids being empathetic. “You could see I was tired and you helped me carry in all those packages. Didn’t it feel good to know you made it easier for me?”

Empathy is a key ingredient of morality

Morality, or moral intelligence, is the capacity to understand right from wrong. It means having strong ethical convictions and acting on them in a right and honorable way. There are seven essential values that form the basis of moral intelligence, says Michele Borba, EdD, in her book “Building Moral Intelligence,” and she puts empathy first on her list of values—along with conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness.

Dr. Borba considers empathy—the ability to identify with and feel another person’s concerns—to be the foundation of moral intelligence. This moral virtue sensitizes our children to different points of views and increases their awareness of others’ ideas and opinions.

Empathy is what enhances our humanness, civility and morality. It’s what moves children to be tolerant and compassionate, to understand other people’s needs and to care enough to help those who are hurt and troubled. ♦

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLERS (5–10)

Where they are. At ages 5, 6 or 7, kids recognize other perspectives but can’t quite put themselves in another person’s shoes.

Between 8 and 10, children can recognize the difference between doing something (behavior) and meaning to do it (intention). By 10 or 12, most kids can consider others’ viewpoint, but that doesn’t mean they always want to be kind and helpful.

With school-age children, self-esteem increasingly comes from how well they perform. They’re aware of different abilities in themselves and others. They are capable of problem-solving and finding alternative approaches, but these are skills that need to be developed.

What you can do. Ask more of children. The better they feel about themselves by learning new skills and having a stake in the family, the more generous they will feel toward others. Have a zero-tolerance policy about interrupting and being disrespectful.

If there is a conflict, ask each child to stop and think what the other person would feel and say if their roles were reversed. This will help kids shift the focus from themselves and think about the impact of their actions.

Help kids develop an emotional vocabulary. Take notice when someone is sad. Use words and questions that help children tune in to feelings. For example: “You seem worried (tense, angry) about something. What’s the matter?” Or “Your friend seems upset. What do you think is bothering her?”

Draw attention to nonverbal cues. “Did you see the expression on Melanie’s face when you were playing today? Maybe you could ask her if everything is OK.”

Share more about your own day instead of just listening to what happened to your kids. And don’t offer a consolation prize or a “fix” for every disappointment. Just listen. ♦

—Adapted from the authors’ new book *Family Whispering* (Atria Books). See *We Recommend* on page 8.

Focusing on the family...as well as on the kids

Melinda Blau and the late Tracy Hogg wrote three bestsellers about infants, babies and toddlers. Now they have widened their lens and applied the same basic principles to the whole family.

The team that taught us baby whispering now encourages us to learn family whispering, which means tuning in, observing, listening and understanding from the perspective of the entire family.

“Family think” doesn’t necessarily contradict “parent think,” say the authors. It’s another perspective, a more expansive one that encourages you to be family-focused instead of totally child-

focused—to flourish as individuals and, at the same time, function better as a unit.

Looking through the prism of the whole family—in other words, seeing the “we” rather than just the “I”—makes it possible to understand and appreciate how one person’s change affects everyone else in the family.

An important goal of this discussion, says Melinda Blau, is to “make people aware of how family members bump

up against each other during the course of the day and how it’s never just between parent and child.”

Family-centered parenting is also more likely to elicit a “we’re in this together” feeling based on empathy (see *Front Page* article) as well as “responsibility,” “authenticity” and “leading with love.”

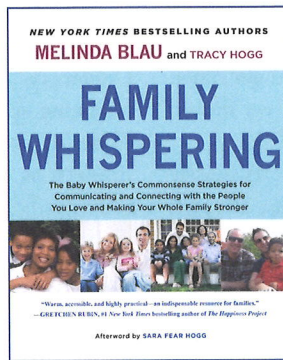
The first half of the book illustrates how we are all connected. The second suggests ways to apply this perspective to everyday challenges

and any unexpected change your family has to face.

Informed by research and real-life examples, *Family Whispering* is filled with valuable tips and advice on how to deal with issues ranging from sibling rivalry to the “chore wars” to designing family routines that work.

The hopeful message of this wonderful book is that having a whole-family outlook makes sense and really does work. It’s an insight that can improve the lives of many parents and children.

Family Whispering (Atria Books, hardcover) is available in bookstores, online and an e-version on Kindle. ♦



Work & Family Life provides information and practical solutions to a wide range of family, job, and health issues. Our purpose is to help our readers reduce their stress and find pleasure and satisfaction in their many roles at work, at home, and in their communities.

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