

Parenting in the Digital World

Booklet Three: Empathy

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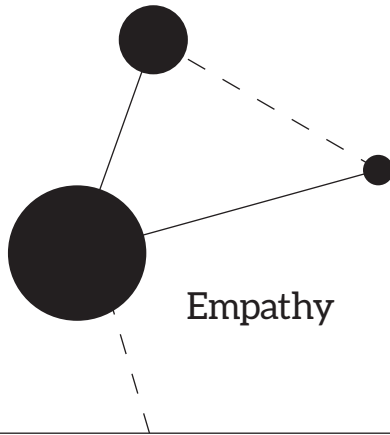
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Intro



“When I say it’s you I like, I’m talking about the part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive.” These words from Fred Rogers, of the popular children television series *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, demonstrate the empathy that this beloved man embodied. It is through empathy that we can “know and be known” by at least one other person. To “be known” is a fundamental need for every human being.

At the depth of empathy, we are able to help one another express our innermost thoughts, feelings, passions, and viewpoints. While finding intersections between our life stories is valuable and extending sympathy towards someone in pain is vital, empathy offers a different perspective. At its purest form, empathy seeks to understand the unique experience of another without preconceived notions, without judgment, and without filtering through one’s own viewpoint.

It is not the same as normalizing. Normalizing is saying, “I understand what it must be like for you.” Empathy is

saying, "Please tell me what it is like for you." Normalizing is beneficial, especially when we offer guidance, because it offers wisdom as a reflection of intellectual insight gained through firsthand experiences. Empathy, when done well, calls forth the vulnerability of another person and allows them to speak freely about their life. Empathy gently gets behind all the masks we attempt to portray to the world and simply says "Aw, there you are."

While empathy is an actual God-given skill and ability granted to many individuals that allows them to dial into the emotional state of another, it actually runs deeper than this. Empathy is a top-tier spiritual weapon against aloneness and hopelessness, because it communicates to another person that they are innately valuable. When life gets really bad and helplessness attempts to take over, empathy reaches out to say "Even when you think you are at your worst, I still see you and I like you. I will help you, because you are worth it."

Empathy is extended to another human being every time we enter "the world" of another, and we do it for their sake. Plus, anytime we do so as part of a personal sacrifice, we most definitely are following in the steps of Jesus. Furthermore, there are many ways to deliver empathy to another person even if you do not possess the actual gift of empathy.

It can be offered through fully participating in someone's favorite hobby or area of interest; by investing in the passions or God-given-purpose of another person; by being fully present and offering a listening ear; or even reminiscing. At a basic level, empathy communicates to another person "I want to understand what makes you who you are," and as I do this, "I want to let you know that I like who you are."

In stark contrast, the opposite of empathy is "Let me make you into my design of who I want you to be." A great

way to stay out of this particular pitfall is to continually pray for and with our children to discern who Christ is calling them to be as part of their secured identity in Him. This counteracts reliance on our own understanding and helps to keep us away from a posture of control or even manipulation towards others.

Empathy has the ability to lower our anonymity, which is a detriment and a poison to our soul and our overall well-being. To paraphrase renowned spiritual formation leader Dallas Willard, "Our soul is designed to live before God and then others." By God's design, there is only one of each of us, and we are meant to share our self with and for others in community.

Every life represents an individual who is full of promise and purpose for a unique time in history. Our God-given gift of interdependence not only ties people together within a given generation but ties generations to generations. This is vital, especially in our technological age. We must champion the real-life communities within both our extended family and in authentic friendships. While each generation has some unique challenges, amazing breakthroughs, and specific contributions to offer humanity, the similarities that tie us all together will always be greater than any of the generational differences. Why?

The struggles and needs of humanity will never change. On the macro level, we will always be an ever-growing population of humans attempting to figure out how to get along with one another, especially given our global diversity. On the micro level, we are communities of people living within both our evolving and set societal norms. On the personal level, we are individuals who are trying to figure out where or if we fit in with others. While this is a very basic description of one of the complexities of humanity, the point is this is a fundamental struggle and the need is the same for every person regardless of when they were born - where do I fit in?

We primarily figure out how we fit into this world by watching how people react and relate to us. As part of the digital age, we have the option to predominately or exclusively allow online feedback to shape our view of ourselves and our place in this world. Specifically for parents, they must deal with this vast arena called the internet, which is attempting to shape their children for good or for bad. Social media and screens, left unchecked, can become the primary influencer.

Developmentally, every generation of pre-adolescents and adolescents will challenge their parents' views and values. During this digital age there is a new wrinkle, due to the fact that we have our first generation of kiddos being raised on technology by parents who were not. Adults are playing catch up to an industry moving at the speed of light. Parents cannot possibly be aware of every influence coming across their child's device, especially in an online industry that markets some of its products towards children and their desire for privacy from adults. Keeping track of who or what is impacting your child has never been more challenging, which is precisely why the quality of real life relationships has never been more important.

All of our carefully selected digital representations of ourselves cannot take the place of real-life interactions, especially when it comes to our emotional development, no matter how creative the "app" or social media platform. Our online personas may appear to demonstrate "perfection," which is actually an unattainable ideal, when in actuality it is only a filtered snippet of who we are.

In addition, all our online impressions may undermine our collective empathy. It requires intentional effort to challenge online images and impressions and not accept them at face value - in other words, to not accept them as the totality of someone's life. This can become dangerous when we fail to recognize that everyone has challenges.

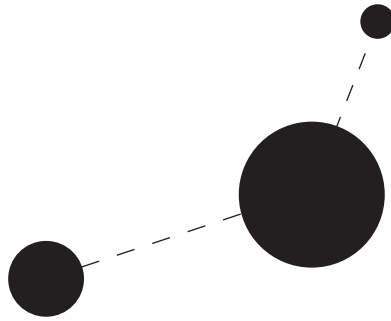
Why? When trouble befalls us, we mistakenly think that we are alone and that everyone around us is doing just fine; or we do not develop the relational skills to help one another in times of difficulty.

To make matters more difficult, if we are uncomfortable with in-person interactions we may only interact with other people through technology; when in reality our challenges, conflicts, and struggles demand the real-world help of at least one other person. When the digital age replaces in-person interactions, empathy suffers or becomes non-existent. Empathy cannot be fully expressed through a media platform. Why? It demands eye-to-eye contact as part of another individual being fully present with us.

Replacing all real-life connections with online-communication is detrimental to our health. Here are some potential warning signs that screens and social media may be over-used: a child who prefers online gaming to playing in person with his or her friends, an adolescent who has increased social media use but less in-person inclusion with peers, a child or adult of any age who becomes agitated if they are asked to step away from their screen time for in-person contact, and finally a child or an adult of any age who becomes rude or impatient with others after prolonged use of technology. For all ages, if real-life problems are offered up for online solutions, it is potentially a red-flag for a life lived without empathy.

The aim is not necessarily to set strict limits on the use of screens, but rather to maintain empathy even in our age of technology. For most children and teens, it is already a challenge to offer empathy to others as they have not ventured beyond the more self-centered stages of their development; however, the earlier they learn about empathy the better. Over time, it will take hold.

Empathy Fostering Tips



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to maintain online experiences as being complementary and not a replacement for real life.

The following suggestions and tips are designed to foster and maintain empathy specifically in our digital age. The goal is “to know” and “be known” through real-life connections. The overall aim is to maintain online experiences as being complementary and not a replacement for real life.

In some cases the tips may require the formation of new habits. It takes at least three months for new habits to form and for them to be more automatic. For individuals who may be accustomed to a lot of screen time, this transition may take longer. Be gentle with yourself and others. Change is difficult, especially when you are training yourself to let go of

areas of comfort for a more challenging journey.

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An additional consideration for parents:

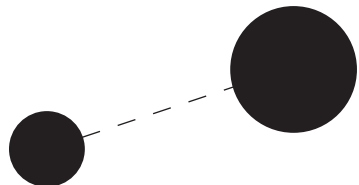
as you incorporate new strategies, remember that if your child is old enough to complain about any changes, they are old enough to understand the importance behind them. Talk to them about the benefits of empathy and having a more well-rounded life beyond their screen-time. This does not necessarily mean they will jump on board, but over time and as the benefits are repeatedly highlighted and emphasized, they may come to understand and even embrace them.

Because screens are so addictive, especially for developing minds, please be extra kind to parents as they

navigate this new era. We all know what it is like to watch a child throw a tantrum to get what they want, nowadays that kiddo may be having a fit over wanting that device. In our digital age, it is an even steeper uphill battle for parents as they help their child interact with technology. Please start by showing the parents even greater empathy as they are the first generation figuring out how to raise technological kiddos.

Before diving into the tips, parents, please remember this and remind yourself of it often:

God chose you to be the parent for each one of your children. He knew exactly what He was doing when He selected you. Please be kind and gracious to yourself in this tough journey called parenting - you deserve it.





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YOU BELONG TO US

The family, by God's design, gives us our greatest sense of belonging. For this exercise, the term belonging is meant to convey not only a sense of belonging but also to impart enjoyment. Every person, but especially a child or a teen, needs to know that they belong to a group of people who do not simply tolerate them but are glad to have them. Through the ups and downs of life, including their errors and even the roughest parts of their temperament, they need to know that they have a family tree that is sticking tight to them no matter what.

Peer groups will gain importance in the eyes of a child and they will

be treated as being more important than the family, especially once the child reaches adolescence. But it is vital that the family holds firm to the child, even when the child pulls away as they seek more independence. In addition to parents, this is where the entire family can impart a sense of belonging to a child. And don't stop there! Friends of the family, church groups, and other ongoing membership to organizations can also play a pivotal role.

The unique challenge associated with technology is that children will want to spend time on their screens as opposed to having face-to-face interactions, especially with people who they perceive to be outside of their generation.



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Tip: Children and teens are rarely interested in sitting around and only talking. While we do want to foster their ability to do more of this, consider planning some family events that include activities. Just by participating in these activities, a child receives a sense of belonging. Try to add some diversity to the types of activities because some people excel at certain activities and others do not. While there is nothing wrong with competitiveness, for this activity, intentionally work towards more cooperativeness. During these times, challenge the family members to put their devices away and limit the use of technology as part of the activity when possible.

Tip: Keep an ongoing record of the story of the family. This would be a great use of technology and allows people to have immediate access. How can you tell the important stories of the family? Through this, can you help your child identify their similarities with other family members and help them make those connections?

When a child starts moving towards adolescence and they begin to really delve into what makes them unique, even if these thoughts are not spoken, they consider points of sameness and differences with their family. At this age, their mind more readily finds the differences. This is normal and healthy. If you can create an online platform for your family, your child can explore their connection with others.



capture the reactions of family members to their important life events.

Specifically, and this is super important, capture the reactions of family members to their important life events. Be specific and be detailed. An example could include, “I remember how hard you were laughing that day. This is when we realized that you and your uncle have the same sense of

humor.” Also, help them to do the same for others, so in turn, they develop their empathy. For this activity, help one another withhold sarcasm. Especially online, sarcasm typically comes across with an “extra bite.”

THE SUN WILL COME UP TOMORROW

Statistically, the number of adolescents reporting an increase in anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts is going up. Tragically, the number of young people who will attempt suicide is also increasing. While there are many causes and contributing factors to these alarming numbers; in line with the topic of empathy, there are some tips that can improve the overall health and well-being of your child in this area.

Tip: Children need problem-solving skills. In order to build their skills, they must gain experience in recovering from mistakes or

errors. Oftentimes, it is really easy for well-meaning adults to bail them out, which means that they miss the important lessons that they need to learn.



If the natural consequences to their actions disappear, they will enter dangerous territory the first time that the adults around them are unable to clean up the mess.

On the part of the well-meaning parent, why would they allow their child to struggle when they can do something about it? The problem is that the child does not learn emotional and relational resilience. If the natural consequences to their actions disappear, they will enter dangerous territory the first time that the adults around them are unable to clean up the mess.

The goal is not to prevent a

child from making mistakes, but rather for them to learn to recover from their errors while they are still living with a parent or parents. If they do not have this experience, the first time a huge mistake happens, they will be at a loss. For these children, the error registers as catastrophic. Depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation can occur when a child thinks they cannot recover, or if they think they have let others down.

They must learn, with the help of another, how to create and execute a strategy to rectify their problems. When a child meets natural consequences, do not remove the consequences, but rather help them problem-solve their way out of it. What do they need to do differently next time? Keep the focus on the actions of the child and not on others, as this is the only part that they have any control over.

Tip: Be very careful to not criticize any of the authority figures in your child's life in front of them, and keep in mind that most children

try to eavesdrop on adults. This is not helpful for the child's empathy and their emotional development. The message they hear in this is "so and so" is unfair and I don't have to engage "unfair people."

Even for adults the notion of fairness is a difficult area. It always has been and always will be for every person. A child needs to learn to live in a world that oftentimes seems unfair, as opposed to trying to fix something that cannot be fixed: obtaining fairness. When a child thinks that unfairness can always be fixed, especially by the actions of others (adults), they will expect this to happen all the time. When it does not, then anxiety and depression may settle in.

Due to the digital age, every adult and child is continuously exposed to example after example of the inequity of this world. With so many online stories of both people we know and also strangers, we watch a steady diet of people who seem to have things better than us, of people who do bad things but seem

to get away with it, and worst of all of people who seem to get their problems fixed by money or other resources. Watching this can be devastating to a child's worth if they believe that fixing their problems is the primary way that someone shows that they care; these online examples are unrealistic and not helpful.

Not to mention, it can be very embarrassing if not humiliating to a parent if their child's mistakes are splashed all over social media. Why wouldn't a parent try to clean up the mistakes of the child? Of course, they would.

Help foster the child and the entire family's empathy. When you come across a problem either firsthand or through social media, engage the child in a discussion of what could

really be going on in this situation. Hypothesize what you think each person is attempting to do in this situation and what is motivating them, and help the child not accept the online story at face value. It is almost like playing detective. Ask "What is the missing information? What other perspectives are missing?" This can almost be turned into an ongoing game that you sprinkle in throughout the day as part of a conversation with your child.

Final Tip: A child literally cannot hear this enough: "There is not a problem that you can get yourself into that I will not be there to help you through. I will not take the problem away, but I will be right by your side. We will figure it out together."

MISTER ROGER'S NEIGHBORHOOD

(show aired 1968- 2001)
This old television program

is Empathy 101. If you are unsure how to convey empathy to another, watch his exchanges with others, as he had a knack for being

fully present with others and reflecting their value back to them. What do you see in his interactions that you could emulate and share with others?

Sitcom Family Activity

(age appropriate 7 and up)
Select a sitcom (situational comedy) that is appropriate for all members of your family age seven or older.

Why age seven and up?

Developmentally, at age seven, most children are able to start applying lessons learned in one area of their life to other areas. Choose one that is centered on a family, and it's even better if the family seems relatable to your family. In a sitcom, there is typically a conflict or a problem that will be solved in 30 minutes or less. Turn this into a family activity that will require empathy. You can start a few discussions:

1. Try to predict how the problem will be resolved.
2. Brainstorm how your family would resolve this problem or has resolved a similar problem.

3. Discuss some of the individual characters and their personalities, does anyone in the family relate to them and why?

4. Finally, and for the sake of empathy this one is key; what, if any, are some good takeaway lessons?

Parents, it is unrealistic to solve most problems in 30 minutes or less. In the even more rapid-fire digital world, your children are exposed to global, national, local, and personal problems. How are they handling all of this? The risks include: is the child witnessing problems being solved or is the child's anxiety going up in the face of all the uncertainty; are problems being solved in realistic and relatable ways or is the child getting a false sense of actual solutions; and, are people attempting to solve problems through online communications. Discuss with your child the pros and cons of some of the online examples. Help them to get a sense of what is actually doable and applicable in their life.



They need to experience a sense of being known. If they do not get this need met, the counterfeit of the online world awaits them.

Who is listening:

Adolescents will always believe that their parents cannot and will not understand their life. Yet, they still need someone to convey empathy to them. They need to experience a sense of being known. If they do not get this need met, the counterfeit of the online world awaits them. This includes online predators. Reprehensively, online predators are skilled at finding a way in to a young person's life.

Parents, consider where your child is most vulnerable to the persuasion of an online predator. Is it through an interest, an emotional need, a void, or even part of their personality? The predator's aim is to expose a

need in your child's life and then position themselves as the only one who can fulfill it. Don't forfeit this ground. Uncover the vulnerability and become part of the solution.

Tip: Find one activity/interest that you and your child can do together. Instead of asking your child to join you in something that you enjoy, flip the script. What is one of their interests? While technology can play a role in this interest, make sure whatever it is, it is not dependent on it. You, as the parent, may not have a natural interest or skill-set for the activity. It does not matter. Your role is to engulf yourself in this interest from your child's perspective.

One of the greatest benefits included in this tip is the conversation that can pop up over time. It is much easier for a child or teen to talk when they are already doing something as opposed to "only" talking.

Examples can include:

reading a book together, shared music or anything

in pop culture, a specific hobby...the list is endless!

Gallup StrengthFinder

resources: This resource and any assessments that offer a lot of insight into individual strengths of teenagers and adults is beneficial. This activity conveys a desire to get to know another person. Parents, you can take an

assessment alongside your child. Assessments such as *Gallup StrengthFinder* not only identify strengths but offer insight into how and where to put them into practice. This is a great way to get to know your child on a deeper level, and one that can result in an action plan of a shared activity.



Most importantly, pray for your child and your entire family's sense of belonging. Ask our gracious Lord to help the bonds of the family to be strengthened and for each person to have at least one person in their life that cultivates their sense of inclusion. Additionally, ask The Holy Spirit to help each person to receive the truth of how Jesus views them: as someone He loves and is willing to lay down His life for.

