

## Fostering Empathy

### Treat the Child with Empathy

- Those who experience empathy are more likely to treat others empathetically
- Children are most likely to experience empathy if there is secure parent-child attachment
- If you are still struggling with past trauma or other serious issues related to your family of origin, talk to a therapist about these as they can impact the security of your relationship to your child
- Be especially sensitive to your child's needs when he/she is hurt or afraid
- Show empathy to your child: think of him/her as a unique gift to you, respect psychological boundaries (i.e., avoid talking for the child, intruding on privacy, using the child/child's success to make yourself feel better), show an interest in his/her world, put yourself in his/her shoes
- Avoid raising your voice, spanking, or criticizing/humiliating when managing behavior
- When dealing with difficult behavior, remember: most children are more likely to change their behavior when they feel you accept them for who they are

### Reduce Stress

- When in danger, we all tend to "look out for number one", so nature's response to danger (i.e., the stress hormones) counteracts empathy hormones like oxytocin
- Therefore, reduce unnecessary stress in your child's life and in yours
- If you or your child are often stressed, do some relaxation exercises or yoga together (note: some children respond better to a sport or physical activity to reduce stress)
- Warm contact and positive social experiences release oxytocin...so be generous with hugs!

### Create Opportunities for Empathy

- Encourage cooperative games/activities with peers (e.g., working as a team; group projects) and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute and is valued
- Be part of a caring community (e.g., religious community, neighborhood watch, parents' group) where you can model giving and receiving help from others
- Discuss daily events and events depicted in the media from an empathetic point of view to encourage perspective taking (i.e., how might different people feel in this situation?)

### Believe in Empathy

- If you believe in God, emphasize his/her compassion rather than judgment/wrath; emphasize your own religion's version of the Golden Rule (all major faiths have it)
- Be humble enough to acknowledge that there may be other valid spiritual paths besides yours (fosters empathy towards people from diverse backgrounds & traditions)
- Show empathy to others: give to the poor, volunteer, show your spouse empathy, treat people from all backgrounds/walks of life with respect, avoid violent or vindictive solutions to problems
- Acknowledge interdependence: talk about how every being has a unique part to play and contributes to the great tapestry of life, rather than judging who is better/worse in your opinion
- Define success as making a positive difference to others, rather than acquiring fame & fortune

### Be Patient when Children Seem to Lack Empathy

- Have modest expectations of children's empathy, especially in the young (who have difficulty taking others' perspectives) and in relation to members of the family (e.g., sibling relationships)
- Help children take a longer term perspective on interpersonal problems (e.g., revenge feels good in the moment, but can damage relationships, self-respect, & reputation in the long run)
- When frustrated by the child's lack of empathy for you, avoid guilt trips (e.g., "Don't you see how you are torturing your poor mother?") as these do NOT teach empathy
- Children on the autistic spectrum, children with conduct problems, and children with a trauma or foster care history may have a more limited capacity for empathy than most, or it may take longer to develop (and usually secure attachment helps more than therapy in this regard)