Empathy: A Key to Overall Resiliency
Objectives

Upon completion of this module, participants will be better able to...

• Define what EMPATHY is
• Identify key correlations between increased empathy and resiliency
• Identify strategies for teaching empathy to youth
• Identify key resources to facilitate infusing empathy into new or existing programming
Why Talk About Empathy?

Recent studies have started to identify an alarming trend among the youth of today. Studies have shown dramatic decreases in youth empathy for others and sharp increases in self-centered thinking...

A study of college freshmen showed the following:

- 58% increase in narcissistic behaviors from previous decades
- 40% decrease in empathy for others over previous decades

A survey of parents/guardians resulted in the following:

- 75% believing youth moral values have decreased
- 72% reporting youth today have weaker moral reasoning
The Selfie Syndrome

Over the last two decades, there has been a noticeable shift...

From "WE" to "ME"...

From this...

To this...
What is Empathy?

While there are many variations on the definition of ‘empathy,’ respected advisor to the United Nations, Roman Krznaric, defines empathy as…

“…the ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and perspectives, and to use that understanding to guide our actions.”

As evidence grows, researchers are noting a dramatic shift in how we view and understand human nature. Evidence suggests humans are not so much wired to be self-interested as they are to be empathetic…

Mary Gordon, founder of *Roots of Empathy*, conducted a study where she placed a seven-month-old baby in the center of a group of 9-year-olds. Gordon asked the 9-year-olds to pay attention to the baby’s face, body language and vocalizations.

Gordon then asked the 9-year-olds these questions: “How does Joshua (the baby) seem to feel today?” “How do we know if someone is upset? Happy?” “How can we help some who is anxious? Scared?”

Gordon knew children must experience empathy to acquire it; children must actively learn the language of how to describe the feelings of empathy to those around them.

Gordon solidified the concept of *Emotional Intelligence*.
Why has the practice of tuning in to feelings become so difficult?

Michelle Borba, a world-renowned expert on developing empathetic children, identified the following during her research...

- We Live in a “Plugged-In” Culture
- We Have Different Expectations of Boys and Girls
- We Live in a Hurried, Harried, Distracted World

A national survey found that 62% of school-age kids said their parents were too distracted when they tried to talk to them.

Teaching Children to Identify Emotions

Teaching children to ‘read’ feelings more accurately can boost overall emotional literacy (intelligence). This is the first step toward cultivating empathy and compassion. One way to assist children in ‘reading’ feelings is to complete this four-step process:

1. **Stop and Tune In:** Press the ‘pause’ button and remember the 4T Rule (no Texting, no Tapping, no Talking on the phone and no TV viewing)

2. **Look Face-to-Face:** Look at the color of the talker’s eyes; for fun, hold eye staring contests to practice this

3. **Focus on Feelings:**
   - Name the feeling: “Looks like you are angry.”
   - Pose questions that tune in to feelings: “Are you angry [tense, anxious, etc.]?”
   - Match the emotion with the gesture: “Your fists are clenched. Do you feel anxious?”

4. **Express the Feelings:** Help children describe how they felt so they have the emotional language the next time something happens

The Need for Positive Moral Identities

As a result of extensive research, Borba found that if a child can imagine him/herself as a caring person, he/she is more likely to care for others. Depositing pro-social images in a child’s identity bank can help him/her define him/herself as a caring, responsible person who values the thoughts and feelings of others.

Parents and youth service workers need to focus more on moral accomplishments of youth (compassion, generosity, thoughtfulness and concern for others), rather than things like cognitive, social and/or physical feats.

• In a national study, 93% of adults felt we [society] were failing to instill values in children
• In a similar national study, 66% of adolescents ranked their own personal happiness as more important than their goodness [moral compass]

In today’s society, character has taken a backseat and success is now determined by wealth and fame; our priorities have become ourselves

Strategies for Strengthening A Child’s Moral Identity

Positive labels help children deposit positive images to use when forming their moral identities. The following strategies can help accomplish this...

1. **Take a reality check**: How does the child respond to encouragement (possible negative responses might include... forgetting the contributions of others, depending on praise and approval, expecting/demanding accolades, tearing others down to feel better)

2. **Align praise with character**: Help the child see him/herself as a ‘good person’ by pointing out how his/her behavior impacts others; just ensure praise given is deserved

3. **Use nouns, not verbs**: Children who hear something like “…be a helper” (noun) are far more likely to help that children who hear something like “…I need you to help” (verb)

4. **Focus on character, not behavior**: Use labels which stress a child’s character, not his/her behavior
   - Character: “You are a considerate and helpful person.”
   - Behavior: “Sharing your toys was a nice thing to do.”

5. **Model it**: At all times, model the behavior/actions you want to see in your children

Empathy Builder: Refusing Temptations

It is easy for children to display appropriate behavior and character with adults around; however, some of the greatest learning opportunities occur when youth are simply with their peers. During these times, a child’s moral identity may be challenged by others; use the following acronym to help children REFUSE temptations and stick up for their beliefs...

R = Review who you are: “Is this the person telling me to do something that isn’t safe or kind?”
E = Express your beliefs: “It’s not my style. I promised my dad I wouldn’t…”
F = Firm voice: State your views using a strong – not yelling – tone
U = Use strong posture: Shoulders back, feet slightly apart, hands by side, head high, looking eye-to-eye
S = Say no and don’t give in: Remind children their job is not to change the other person’s mind, but to stick up for what they believe in
E = Exit: Sometimes the best option is to leave the scene completely

Perspective Taking: The ability to understand another person’s thoughts, feelings, wants and needs

Psychologist, Martin Hoffman, developed the concept of induction discipline and its impact on children...

Hoffman found that parents who consistently react to their child’s misbehavior by highlighting the distress of the one harmed, and who help them understand the impact of their actions, tended to have more empathetic children.

Helping Youth Develop Perspective Taking Skills

Hoffman made note of four steps of the inductive discipline method and used the acronym CARE to help with recall of the crucial parts of the approach...

**Step 1: C= Call Attention to Uncaring** – Naming *what* the child did that was wrong and describing *why* it was uncaring

**Step 2: A = Assess How Uncaring Affects Others** – Highlighting the victim’s feelings; start by asking your child to think about how he/she would feel, think or need if treated the same way

**Step 3: R = Repair the Hurt and Require Reparations** – These must be heartfelt, age-appropriate and ‘fit the crime’

**Step 4: E = Express Disappointment and Stress Caring Expectations** – Explain how you (as the adult) feel about uncaring actions and express your disappointment in the child’s behavior

Empathy-Builder Strategy

Teaching children to tune in and listen to others is an impactful way to boost perspective taking and build/strengthen overall empathy. This can be achieved with the following steps...

**Step 1: FOCUS “Pay Attention to the Other Person”** - Teach children these key listening skills
- **S** = Sit or stand still so you pay attention to the speaker
- **O** = Be open to the speaker’s view and feelings
- **L** = Lean in slightly to convey interest
- **E** = Look eye-to-eye. To stay focused, look at the color of the other person’s eyes
- **R** = Recognize the speaker’s views; acknowledge by nodding and smiling to show you care

**Step 2: FEEL “Look and Listen” for the Feeling** – Sometimes the other person may not say how he/she feels; teach children to cue into body language, facial expressions or tone of voice. Ask for clarification if unsure

Step 3: IMAGINE “Put Yourself in Their Shoes” – Recognizing the other person’s perspective is key in this step; while the other person talks, encourage children to imagine what he/she is thinking or feeling inside to they might be able to figure out what he/she needs. For older youth, encourage them to ask questions like, “If it were me, I’d feel/think/want...”

Step 4: SHARE “Describe Their Side” – Encourage children to paraphrase the other person’s perspective to strengthen their personal empathy. This step might include repeating what the other person said, summarizing and identifying key points from what the other person said and offering support and apologies for what led to the initial situation.

NOTE: It is important to help children, especially younger children, understand that listening and understanding someone does not mean they have to agree with that person. People will have different opinions, so we must listen without judgement, without giving our opinion, without debating someone else’s point of view.

Reading to Cultivate Empathy

Recent studies have proven that children who read often are not only smarter, but develop into kinder, more empathetic adults. In a study following 17,000 people from birth to age fifty, it was discovered that their reading level at age seven was the most important indicator of their future socioeconomic status; reading for pleasure at age fifteen was the most important indicator of future overall success.

- 64% of parents say they read bedtime stories to their children
- 91% of parents say they were read to as a child before bed
- 28% of parents say they use mobile devices to put their children to sleep

Picture books like Madeline, Stellaluna, The Hundred Dresses, etc. are rich in emotion-charged content which greatly supports the development of empathy in youth, particularly in the first seven years of life.

Helping children correlate colors to identify feelings can be very impactful. While children may not know the exact words to describe how they are feeling, they can often times identify colors which tie into their emotions.

In Iowa, we utilized the Dr. Seuss book, *My Many Colored Days*, as a teaching tool during our Yellow Ribbon events. We designed an entire lesson around reading the book, talking about recognizing our feelings and connecting feelings to individual colors. Parents/guardians were provided a brief summary of the book and a handout that showed each color and to which emotion(s) it correlated.

This helped create a common emotional language between children and their parents/guardians.
What kind of day are you having?

Another effective strategy to use in fostering emotional intelligence/literacy is to being using the stoplight approach. This strategy is great for youth of all ages.

Using paper (or another medium), create three shapes in the following colors: red, yellow and green. Talk with youth about how colors tie into emotions and how we sometimes have to give clues for others to follow so they better understand how we are feeling.

- RED = Angry, upset, frustrated
- YELLOW = Confused, distracted, melancholy
- GREEN = Happy, positive, excited

You can expand on this strategy and use things like rainbow where there are more color options to tie into various other feelings.

As youth enter a room or begin an activity, ‘post’ the color you are feeling at the time. This allows youth to start ‘reading’ clues into how others are feeling.
Using Questions to Stretch Moral Imagination

There are many ways to utilize literature and movies to cultivate a child’s empathy, open their hearts and care for others. This process is referred to as stretching the moral imagination. The simple process of asking questions can help as follows...

**Step 1: Pose “What If” Questions**
- What if you were that character...?
- If that were you, would you do the same thing?

**Step 2: Ask “How Would You Feel” Questions**
- Have you ever had that same experience? How did you feel?
- What’s happening to [character]? What do you think is going through his/her mind? Have you ever had the same thoughts?

**Step 3: Switch the Focus from “Me” to “You”**
- Pretend you’re the character. How do you think he/she feels right now? What does he/she need to feel better?
- Be a mind reader... What do you think he/she is thinking? Why do you say that?

Using Mindfulness to Self-Regulate

Science has shown that practicing mindfulness – even a few minutes each day – can result in positive benefits such as improved immunity, reduced stress, increased resiliency, enhanced focus and improved memory.

Research on the effectiveness of mindfulness yielded the following results:

• Fourth and fifth graders regulated stress better, were more optimistic, kinder, helpful and improved in math
• At-risk third graders showed significant improvement in behavior and focusing
• Teen showed lower depression and stress levels and improved well-being
• Elementary students improved self-control and respect for others

Kindness and Empathy

For a long time, kindness was simply viewed as a ‘warm and fuzzy’ skill; however, recent scientific studies have shown the benefits that come from adopting a kindness mindset: improved overall health, reduced anxiety, enhanced self-esteem, increased gratitude and elevated happiness.

Children must be provided ample opportunities to practice kindness to others – without expecting gold stars or trophies for their efforts.

Popular initiatives include ‘Paying it Forward’ or completing ‘Random Acts of Kindness.’ Regardless of the initiative utilized, programming must afford children opportunities to practice and reflect upon their own kindness towards others.

NOTE: National Random Acts of Kindness Week is 12-18 February 2017!

WEBSITE: https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/rakweek

Strategies for Infusing Kindness into Everyday Life

Incorporating aspects of kindness into our everyday life does not require great effort, finances or time. Studies have show the following strategies to be quite successful in helping children recognize, practice and reflect on their personal kindness towards others...

- **Model Kindness**: Parents/guardians, youth service workers and others must model kindness in their own actions and explain to children how it made them feel.
- **Expect Kindness in Others**: Parents/guardians who express their views about unkind behavior and explain why they feel that way tend to have children who adopt those same views.
- **Value Kindness**: Periodically push the ‘Pause’ button and reflect on your dialogue; if you notice an imbalance of one-sided messages, make an intentional effort to tip the scale back to stress kindness.
- **Reflect on Kindness**: Help children reflect on their own kindness by asking questions like, “What did you do that you feel good about?” or “What’s something nice that someone did for you?” This simple tweak helps children start looking for kindness and reflecting upon the virtue.
- **Explain Kindness**: Take the time to explain specific ways in which kindness benefitted someone else.

Empathy Through Teamwork and Collaboration

Working together on common goals can help children make the crucial shift from “I-Me-Mine” to “We-Our-Us.”

“Collaboration has the capacity to join people who have separate or conflicting interests, who do not feel good about each other, who are unequal, or who simply do not understand one another.”

Richard Sennett, Sociologist

If collaboration is a key factor in fostering empathy and kindness, why is it so difficult in today’s society?

• **Reduced Playtime:** Between 1981 and 1997, ‘free play’ for children has fallen by 50%
• **Over-structured Existences:** A Univ of CO study found kids spending too much time in structured activities were less able to use their executive functioning skills (problem solving, decision making)
• **Banning Recess:** Ginsberg notes play promotes cognitive growth and intelligence, boots social skills and strengthens parent-child connections
• **Hypercompetitiveness:** A competitive focus decreases peer relationships, empathy and long-term success

Building Collaboration Skills in Youth

Use the following strategies to help children learn the habit of solving social conflicts peacefully while also considering the other person’s feelings and needs...

• **Say “WE”:** Subtle pronoun changes can help children realize life should revolve around “Us” and “We,” not “Me” and “I”

• **Broaden Horizons:** Provide children to experience diverse situations, cultures, customs and traditions

• **Look for Similarities:** Help children identify commonalities with others

• **Stress “Like me.”:** Building beyond similarities, look at areas like fears, dreams, feelings, worries, etc.

• **Teach “Reality Check!”:** Hit the ‘Pause’ button and examine how stereotypes destroy empathy

• **Use Diverse Literature:** Children should be provided opportunities to experience a world beyond what they know or assume they know

Moral courage is an inner strength that motivates children to act on their empathetic urges and help others despite the consequences.

For years, a lot of language in the area of bullying identified other children as bystanders; witnesses to bullying. As research continues to grow, we know we must now equip children with the skills to become upstanders and utilize their empathy skills to help those around them.

Roadblocks to Moral Courage

Recent studies noted that when bystanders step in on behalf of bullied peers (upstanding), bullying stops 57% of the time, and within 10 seconds. Sadly, the same studies showed that in cases of bullying, bystanders only engaged on behalf of their bullied peer(s) 19% of the time.

Why is there such a gap between children witnessing bullying and intervening?

• **Powerlessness:** “I didn’t know how to make it stop.”
• **Vague Expectations:** “I wasn’t sure if I should help.”
• **Peer Pressure:** “I don’t want to be a snitch and lose my friends.”
• **The Diffusion of Responsibility:** “Somebody else will help.”
• **Empathy Over-arousal:** “I felt too bad to help.”
• **Weak Adult Support:** “My [mom, dad, teacher, etc.] didn’t believe me.”

Helping Children Find Their Inner Hero

I think I can... I think I can... I think I can...

The story of the *Little Engine That Could* is one many heard as children growing up. This story, while simplistic in nature, delivers a powerful message about overcoming all obstacles and ‘pushing’ through despite what the world around you says or does.

In a culture hyped with greed, selfishness and minimized integrity, raising children to have a sense of personal valor is critical for their long-term success.

Morally courageous children, research shows, grow up to be more resilient, well-adjusted adults. Morally courageous children (essentially) become unsung heroes who do not expect accolades and trophies, but who act on their concern for others out of their moral beliefs – they possess strong moral identities and live by their values.
Strategies for Cultivating Moral Courage

In a study done by Ervin Staub, it was noted that as children age, their overall willingness and desire to positively respond to those around them (moral courage) decreases. Second graders positively responded 90% of the time; however, that number decreased to 40% of fourth graders and only 30% of sixth graders.

How do we help children cultivate their moral courage and find their inner hero?

- **Expect Social Responsibility:** Children are significantly more likely to help others if they believe their parents/guardians, friends and other ‘influencers’ around them expect them to support those in need

- **Set An Example:** Let children see you step out of your comfort zone, tackle fears and stick your (proverbial) neck out for the benefit of others

Strategies for Cultivating Moral Courage

(CONTINUED)

• **Offer Heroes:** Offer children the opportunity to speak with, read about and engage with heroes around them (Service Members, firefighters, police officers, etc.) and those they can read about (Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, Harry Potter, etc.)

• **Stop Rescuing:** It is human nature for adults (especially parents/guardians) to intervene on behalf of their children; however, research shows that children need opportunities to test and expand the problem-solving and conflict resolution skills; put children in the ‘driver’s seat’ and support when needed

• **Try Small-Scale Courage:** Remind children of the small fears they overcome on a regular basis; developing moral courage and finding your inner hero does not require tackling great fears or feats – take time to recognize the daily victories and successes

In order for children to feel comfortable with intervening on behalf of someone else, they need to be equipped with strategies/skills they can utilize in those moments. An easy way to do this is using the acronym STANDUP...

- **S** = **S**eek Support: Try to engage others in a positive way
- **T** = **T**ell a Trusted Adult: Know the difference between ‘reporting’ and ‘tattling’
- **A** = **A**ssist the Victim: If others see you help, they are more likely to join in as well
- **N** = **N**egate with a Positive View: Counter negative comments with a positive perspective
- **D** = **D**esign a Detour: Drain a bully’s power by reducing the audience
- **U** = **U**se a Distraction: Distractions can disperse a group or divert attention elsewhere
- **P** = **P**ause and Rethink: An upstander’s comment(s) can make others pause to consider consequences

Scientists and researchers have proven that we are born with natural desires to help others. The challenge is that our culture and parenting approaches can have negative impacts on our innate altruistic growth and development.

Author, Alfie Kohn, best sums this up as follows:

“Encouragement to think of oneself as a generous person—an appeal not to self-interest but to genuine altruism—seems to be the most reliable way to promote helping and caring over the long haul and in different situations.”

Youth must be provided opportunities to give back, practicing altruism and reflecting on their actions in order to further strengthen their natural-born helper trait...

Strategies for Increasing Altruism

By changing the way youth view empathy, to see that it is a core trait in humanity, we can strengthen the concept of “WE” versus “ME” thinking...

• **Teach the Growth Mindset Model:** Help youth see that empathy and altruism are skills to learn and practice, much like playing an instrument or sport
• **Emphasize Effort:** Reflect with youth on the process of showing generosity versus the end product; the subtle switch stresses that empathy can be expanded
• **Encourage Practice:** Foster altruism by creating small ways for youth to give to others; donating old toys, giving part of their allowance to a charity they select, or helping a neighbor rake leaves
• **Recap the Impact:** Following an event, ask children questions like: “What did the person do when you helped?” “How do you think he/she felt?” “How did this make you feel? Why do you think that is?”

Seven Creative Ways to Help Children Succeed

1. **Be Friendly:** Inspire youth to be change-agents and create a friendlier world around themselves; Say ‘hello’ to others, ask how others are doing – these simple actions help foster kindness

2. **Break Down Barriers:** Parents/guardians/youth service workers should expand children’s familiarity circles to include those ‘not like them,’ which opens new paths to empathy

3. **Give Kids a Voice:** In an ever-growing, hyper-connected world, children must be able to identify what they stand for and practice using their voices to speak out for others

4. **Play Chess and Unplugged Games:** Part of gaining/building empathy is being able to see things from others’ perspectives; anticipate their thoughts, needs and moves – much like a game of chess

5. **Create Networks:** Youth service workers should be asking questions of the following nature:
   - What skills will youth need to succeed in a global economy?
   - What ways can we broaden youth’s views about those of different backgrounds?
   - What types of meaningful service projects can we offer youth on a regular basis?

6. **Build Caring Relationships:** Empathy will only begin to ‘take root’ when you feel they are in safe and supportive environments; feeling accepted and heard – help youth develop their intra and interpersonal skills and build connections with others.

7. **Don’t Give Up On a Child:** Building empathy takes time, effort and patience; trying to figure out the needs/views of others is challenging, so work to provide continued support, positive modeling and encouragement.

Empathy is the root of humanity and the foundation that helps children become good, caring people; empathy skills provide children with the skills necessary for happiness and success in life.

Empathy and Change

While many theories abound, with regard to building empathy, the bottom line is that it is a gradual process where individuals work to refine ever-increasing skill-sets. The theory below highlights how increasing empathy can help mitigate some of the negative challenges associated with change...

When confronted with change, moving through this identified process can help youth build success in their lives.
Change Through an Empathetic Mindset

**Step 1: Awareness** – This involves having a general idea(s) as to what changes may be necessary and proactively thinking about them ahead of time.

**Step 2: Judging** – Asking yourself the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of the upcoming change and what steps you might need to take to be successful.

**Step 3: Understanding** – What other factors might be driving this change? Are there things you may have input on or are decisions being made outside your scope of influence?

**Step 4: Appreciating** – While change can be difficult to accept, it can also be difficult to oversee; view the situation from the other person’s perspective who is responsible for implementing the change.

**Step 5: Valuing** – Take time to celebrate your victories (however great or small) and the time, talents and insights of others involved; learn to see these change situations as personal/professional growth opportunities.
Empathy-Builder Activity

With older youth, it can be helpful to have them utilize a graphic organizer to strengthen their perspective-taking skills. An activity like this can be done individually or even as a small group. Utilize this following an off-site visit, service learning project or following a movie or other activity where relationships and conflict both might be present.

This could also be helpful when ‘walking’ youth through a conflict resolution process; whether youth complete a physical copy or an adult asks the questions and youth respond aloud.
Empathy-Builder Activity (APPLICATION)

Following an activity, or as a way of supporting conflict resolution initiatives, youth would take time to reflect on the questions posed by the graphic organizer. The goal being to help youth with perspective-taking and see a situation from someone else's side...

**Think and Feel:**
- Why do you think ______________ did what he/she did?
- How do you think ______________ felt before? After? What makes you say that?

**See:**
- What did ___________ see? How would you have felt if you were in his/her place?

**Hear:**
- What were others saying that __________ may have heard?
- How would you feel if you heard people saying that about you? Why would you feel that way?

**Say and Do:**
- What did others say or do during the situation?
- What would you have wanted others to do if this had happened to you? Why is that?
Empathy-Builder Activity

PAIN

• How do you think this situation made _________ feel? Why do you say that?

• How do you think this experience will impact _________ in the future?

• How did you feel when you saw the situation happen?

• How would you have felt if this had happened to you? Why do you say that?

GAIN

• What could you have done to make this situation better?

• What do you think the bully/harasser hoped to gain from this?

• What could you do differently the next time you are in this situation?

• How could you help your friends if they are ever in a situation like this?
While some youth may naturally be more empathetic, that is not to say all youth cannot learn to be empathetic. Dr. Borba encourages youth service workers and parents/guardians to think about the values they want youth to have when they reach adulthood...

Begin at an early age by developing a family or program mantra that illustrates those values...

- We Help, We Don’t Hurt...
- We Are Caring
- We Make the World A Better Place
- Everyone Matters, Everyone is Valued
Resources


- “Empathy is a Verb” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVTiplEG91s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVTiplEG91s)

- “How to Activate Kids’ Empathy” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqUgVH5jBml](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqUgVH5jBml)

Quiz

As evidence of completion of this course, you will need to complete the short assessment tool provided. To access the assessment, please click on the link below:

CLICK HERE TO BEGIN YOUR ASSESSMENT:
https://www.classmarker.com/online-test/start/?quiz=vr587e26c216c14

Please Note: Following completion of the assessment, please save the results certificate and then email the results to your RAPM. This will serve as your documentation of completion.
You have now completed the Empathy and Resilience Module. Congratulations!