

Promoting flexible perspective taking in children and adolescents

As children grow they gradually learn how to take the perspectives of people around them—to understand what others might be thinking and feeling—and to use that to predict their behavior. They also get better at understanding their own perspective, understanding their own thoughts, feelings and behavior over time. This skill is vital to social interactions as well as maintaining emotional wellbeing. It is ideal for children to develop the ability to take perspectives well and to take perspectives flexibly, to easily and flexibly shift from their own perspective, to other people's perspectives and back. It is also ideal for children to learn to see themselves, and other people, as enduring perspectives, not just as a collection of facts like 'I am good at art' or 'I am bad at making friends'. Understanding themselves as an enduring perspective, with growth and change always a possibility in the area of 'facts', is consistent with a growth mindset. A growth mindset predicts persistence and resilience across time.

Parents can support children to develop **flexible perspective taking skills**. As a parent you can:

- Actively take your child's perspective from birth and talk about this out loud with your child. For example, 'oh you are loving that doggie, aren't you?' Or 'I think you are hungry. Are you feeling hungry?' This helps children to notice and label their own thoughts, feelings and sensations. Make sure you are expressing what you honestly think your child's perspective actually is, not what you'd like it to be. For example, 'you are feeling really angry at your brother, huh?' after a sibling squabble.
- Use lots of words referring to perspectives including mental and emotional states. Think of words that indicate intention and desire like: want or wish as well as feeling words like: happy, sad, excited or angry. If you are regularly taking your child's perspective and verbalising that you will find that you are often talking about your child's mental and emotional state. You can also use mental and emotional state talk about your own state or that of other people or even animals. For example, you might model process of noticing your own perspective with something like, 'I'm feeling quite down today. I think it is because I've had a long week at work.' Or you could talk about the mental and emotional states of others with something like, 'wow isn't puppy excited! Puppy wants that toy!' As children age, more subtle mental-state/emotional-state language can be used, for example, words such as 'melancholy' or 'elated'.
- Prompting perspective-taking when reading stories or watching media through questions like, 'how do you think she's feeling?' or 'what do you think he is going to do next?' With older children, this can be expanded by deliberately seeking books and media that are subtextually complex, that is, where perspective-taking is required in order to fully understand the story at another level.
- Prompting perspective-taking for other people and animals during everyday interactions with questions like, 'do you think kitty likes that?' or 'why is doggie barking? What does doggie want?' During middle-childhood and adolescence this can include using perspective taking to understand and explore the child's social interactions with peers.
- Through mental and emotional state rich pretend play, for example, asking about the dolly's feelings or why doggie is dancing.
- By having 'values and vulnerabilities' conversations with your child; this is particularly impactful in middle childhood and adolescence. For example, a parent, after a fight with a teen, might say, 'I am sorry to have yelled. It was wrong of me to speak to you like that, even though I was angry (vulnerability). It's just that I get so frightened at the thought of you not being safe when you come home late (vulnerability) – your safety and well-being are more important to me than anything (values), although I know this all comes out wrong sometimes (vulnerability).' This models for the child a willingness to accept and acknowledge

unwanted or unhelpful behaviors in themselves, while demonstrating acting with intention, consistent with values.

- By giving both praise and criticism that is process-orientated, that is focused on effort and strategy. This supports children in seeing the facts about themselves flexibly, as something potentially changeable, rather than a core part of themselves. For example, a child who is doing poorly in mathematics at school can relate to this flexibly as a current fact about themselves that is open to change—maybe with extra effort, or tuition, or by asking the teacher for assistance performance could improved—not as a core and unchanging aspect of themselves ‘I am bad at mathematics because I just can’t do it and there is nothing I can do to change that.’ This aspect of flexible perspective taking is also called a growth mindset.