

Supporting the development of compassion

Compassion is sensitivity to suffering combined with a motivation to help alleviate or prevent suffering. The ability to both give and receive compassion, to ourselves and to others, is important for emotional health and social abilities.

Parents can support the development of compassion in children.

Here are some ideas:

- Model compassion including being a compassionate parent and letting your child see you being compassionate to others.
- Model self-compassion. Try to approach yourself with all the compassion and care that you would show to a good friend and let your child see yourself doing that.
- Look for little acts of compassion in your child and reinforce them. For example, in early childhood a child might notice that another child is hurt and give them a hug. An adolescent might express interest in a particular charity or political movement, emphasise with a particular character or engage in a compassionate action towards a friend. Reinforce any acts of compassion and name them as such.
- Look also for little acts of self-compassion in your child and reinforce them too. Let your child know that is a good thing to engage in self-care and reinforce them for it.
- Scaffold compassionate actions by talking about how others think and feel and the impact of your child's behavior on them. Don't do this in an aversive or controlling way, however. Compassion must be freely chosen. If you find yourself becoming controlling and pushing your child towards compassion, pause and re-connect with being compassionate towards your child.
- Consider finding opportunities for your child to play with and care for younger children and babies. This may be as simple as making the most of opportunities at a playground or park. Younger children and babies are very good at eliciting caring responses from those around them including other children. Remember, especially with a younger child, to scaffold compassionate responses.
- Consider finding opportunities to interact with animals. Animals too, are often quite successful in eliciting caring responses from children and teens. Again, remember to scaffold compassionate responses.
- In younger children pretend play with baby dolls or animal toys can provide opportunities for play with compassionate themes and for practicing compassion. You can also specifically introduce compassionate themes into pretend play with your child for example, 'oh no! He is badly injured. Should we get him to the medic?' Don't be alarmed if your child continues with an aggressive theme in the play. Just persistently introduce a compassionate perspective.
- Introducing a compassionate perspective into discussions of books, media or real life interactions such as peer group interactions.
- Find and support opportunities for your child to engage with charitable organisations and activities.