

# Research Guide (Grades PreK–6)

## College and Career Competency: *Empathy*

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### Definition:

Empathy is defined as the ability to relate to the perspective or feelings of another individual. Without empathy, individuals remain indifferent or dismissive towards others and may engage in antisocial behavior. Empathy provides a means for people to lead compassionate and socially aware lives. In short, empathy can be defined as trying to understand others and then showing your understanding (Noonan et al., 2022).

### Essential Components for Students:

1. Make efforts to understand others: their contexts, feelings, and behaviors.
2. Communicate your understanding of someone's personal situation.

### Competency Sequence for Students:

These targets describe how students demonstrate competency knowledge (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018). These targets can be used to determine students' growth over time.

	Empathy
<b>Beginning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interprets emotions in the facial expressions or behaviors of other people.</li> <li>• Identifies what kind of emotion(s) specific actions or responses might cause a person to feel.</li> <li>• Demonstrates helping behaviors when someone is hurt or sad.</li> <li>• Identifies and labels their own basic feelings and emotions.</li> </ul>
<b>Emerging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describes similarities and differences between themselves and others.</li> <li>• Demonstrates increased awareness of others' feelings and perspectives.</li> <li>• Defines feeling words that describe basic personal emotions in themselves and others.</li> <li>• Recognizes when someone needs help, and offers help.</li> <li>• Interprets facial expressions and nonverbal cues of others.</li> <li>• Demonstrates basic listening strategies.</li> </ul>
<b>Proficient</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates listening strategies.</li> <li>• Describes meanings of various feeling words and pairs feeling words with scenarios imagining another's perspective.</li> <li>• Describes the importance of understanding perspective.</li> <li>• Demonstrates methods to understand a peer's perspective, such as asking questions.</li> <li>• Communicates in respectful ways when responding to different points of view.</li> </ul>

### Research:

- Empathy is connected to **self-awareness**. More specifically, students who are self-aware of their own personal characteristics, including strengths and weaknesses, can better empathize with others regarding differing traits and areas of improvement (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Brent & Millgate-Smith, 2008).

- Empathy is made up of affective and cognitive components. Affective empathy entails feeling others' emotions, while cognitive empathy requires perspective taking (Fredrick et al., 2020). Affective empathy is often related to unconscious reactions; cognitive empathy, to conscious, intentional behaviors (Llorent et al., 2020).
- When teachers display empathy towards their students, they model desirable behavior and improve the overall learning experience. Students typically derive trust and gain confidence when a culture of empathy is present in the classroom (Cooper, 2011; Berkovich, 2020).
- [The 12-week Kindness Curriculum](#) is a preschool curriculum based on mindfulness that emphasizes empathy, gratitude, and sharing (Flook et al., 2015). Teachers reported that participating children improved on "indicators of learning, social-emotional development, and health" (p. 49) as well as in grades and social competence.
- Students who regularly interact with animals or care for their needs tend to show an increase in empathetic behavior and personal responsibility (Daly & Suggs, 2010; Hergovich et al., 2002; Sprinkle, 2008). Classroom pets, for example, can consistently reinforce prosocial behavior, including empathy.
- Researchers (Jones et al., 2015) found statistically significant associations between social-emotional skills measured in kindergarten and young adult outcomes in domains that included employment and education. They conclude that measuring these skills early can help identify opportunities for early interventions to build these important skills.
- Akos (2000) recommends small-group activities that help children better understand their own feelings and the feelings of others to build empathetic skills. According to developmental psychology, children in grades K–3 experience empathy through emotional reactions and the ability to recognize different emotions. This knowledge includes understanding the sources of emotions and the results of expressing them (Spinrad & Gal, 2018). A curriculum and activities for younger children can be built around recognizing emotions in others and themselves.
- Children who receive material rewards for empathetic behavior are less likely to behave empathetically in contexts in which they don't receive rewards (Spinrad & Gal, 2018). Material rewards probably undermine children's internal motivation. However, nonmaterial reinforcement, such as praise, does increase children's empathetic behavior.
- Enhancing children's emotional understanding through a conversational intervention produced significant gains in empathy (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani, 2014). The intervention consisted of 15 one-hour small-group (five to six students, average age 7) sessions held twice a week where researchers guided discussions of the children's experiences and thoughts about everyday emotional life situations.
- After playing a video game featuring domestic violence, students were more likely to intervene in staged harassment (Boduszek et al., 2019). The game featured multiple perspectives, including friends and other peers whom players could control and interact with to work toward positive outcomes. They could practice prosocial behaviors and conversations, including active listening.
- In a study of first, second, and fifth graders, those who participated in service learning projects or other similar engagements had increased empathy in all groups, and for fifth graders, it also led to a raise in civic efficacy (Scott & Graham, 2015).
- Roots of Empathy is a program in which an infant and their parent/caregiver visit a class monthly and participate in lessons regarding emotions, caring for others, and infant development. A study on the impact of this program on children's social-emotional competence that included 585 students in grades 4–7 found that those children who were given the monthly

empathy training had “significantly increased prosocial behaviors” compared to those in the control groups (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2011).

- Social studies instruction can help students foster empathy, since they have to take on the viewpoints of people from different historical contexts (Lee et al., 2018).
- Reading fiction helps students develop empathy (Roza & Guimarães, 2022). By simulating real-life problems, fiction evokes emotional involvement and helps students practice perspective taking. The development of empathy, promoted by reading fiction, correlates to decreased anxiety and an increased willingness to examine viewpoints different from one’s own.
- **Self-regulation** of emotions is part of empathy (Hein et al., 2018). Children with high levels of self-regulation are more empathetic. Self-regulation of emotions helps children be empathetic even in negative situations, possibly because regulation prevents them from being overwhelmed by their own emotions.
- For students to intervene in bullying, they have to process several steps: noticing bullying, interpreting it as a situation requiring intervention, accepting responsibility for intervening, knowing how to intervene, and actually intervening (Fredrick et al., 2020). Affective empathy is related to interpreting bullying as a situation requiring intervention and actually intervening. Cognitive empathy is related to noticing bullying, accepting responsibility, and knowing how to respond. Students may need instruction in completing all the steps. For example, a student might not notice bullying but, if they did, would intervene. Empathy instruction, therefore, should focus on both affective (how others feel) and cognitive empathy (what situations likely produce such feelings).

## Assessment:

- The Empathy Formative Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2016) is a 15-item instrument that measures students’ proficiency in two essential components of empathy: making efforts to understand others’ contexts, feelings, behaviors, etc. and communicating that understanding. The Empathy Formative Questionnaire results can be used by both teachers and students to assess relative strengths and areas for improvement. Students are asked to rate themselves on each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not Very Like Me*, and 5 = *Very Like Me*); results are displayed on a 100-point scale. The results are automatically graphed for students once they complete the questionnaire, enabling them to immediately reflect on their results. Results are also available to the teacher for individual students and in aggregate. While the questionnaire is written at a seventh-grade reading level, per the Flesch-Kincaid readability score, it can be adapted for grades 1–5 as necessary. The following example items represent each of the two essential components:
  - I try to see things from other people’s points of view. (Understand others)
  - I say things like, “I can see why you feel that way.” (Communicate understanding)

Teachers can access the questionnaire by setting up an account through

<https://www.cccstudent.org/> and following the instructions to launch a survey and administer it to students. Students (and teachers) can use individual questionnaire results to identify empathetic behaviors that students can focus on cultivating or strengthening.

## Instructional Practices:

- The executive director of the Center for Anti-Bullying & Non-Violence developed the PEACE Curriculum, which is “supplementary Aggression Replacement Training materials” (Salmon, 2003). The main component of these materials is the empathy training. [Teaching Empathy: The](#)

[PEACE Curriculum](#) provides a number of free lessons and practice areas for students of all ages. Lessons deal with empathetic gestures and appropriate responses to communication.

- The Center for Anti-Bullying & Non-Violence (n.d.) provides additional [free lesson ideas](#) for grades pre-K–12 such as empathy, anger management, social skills, and character education monitoring forms.
- Dr. Gwen Dewar (2009) provides [tips](#) for teaching children the “different facets and degrees of empathy.” The tips are based on current evidence-based research and include:
  - Provide children with the support they need to develop strong self-regulation skills,
  - Help kids discover what they have in common with other people,
  - Foster cognitive empathy through literature and role-playing, and
  - Seize everyday opportunities to model and induce sympathetic feelings for other people.
- Teaching Tolerance (n.d.), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, offers educators a lesson on developing empathy. This is available in grade-appropriate lessons spanning pre-K to grade 12 through the following links:
  - Grades K–2: “[What Is Empathy?](#)”
  - Grades 3–5: “[Understanding Empathy](#)”
  - Grades 6–8: “[Developing Empathy](#)”
  - Teaching Tolerance also offers a [Learning Plan Builder](#). The plan allows you to select one or more grade levels and one or more social justice domains as well as choose essential questions and topics to align with your instructional goals.

The website also includes [specific examples](#) of fostering empathy in the classroom through students’ involvement with animals (Wilson, 2014).

- Two books/downloads providing conversational interventions for pre-K–1, *The Stories of Ciro and Beba: How to Enhance Conversation With Toddlers on Emotions* and *The Stories of Jack and Theo: How to Enhance Conversation on Mental-State Terms Through Language Games*, can be found at <https://www.labpse.it/en/programmi-di-intervento/> (Ornaghi, Agliati, & Grazzani, 2014; Ornaghi & Grazzani, 2013).
- For students in grades pre-K–6, the Animal Humane Society (n.d.) provides [lesson plans](#) that use animals to teach core skills and values like empathy. The age-appropriate lessons are aligned with the National Education and Common Core Standards in science, math, language arts, health, and social studies.
  - “[From Nose to Tail](#)” provides lesson plans for students of each age group, teaches students about dog-related humane issues, and helps kids learn about character education concepts such as compassion, responsibility, and empathy.
  - Other lesson plans teach the students about animal habitats, pet safety, ecosystems, and the animal-trade industry.
  - Service-learning project ideas (and in some cases opportunities) are also provided and teach students about working cooperatively, while providing practice in reading and budgeting skills.
- [Multicultural lesson plans and resources](#) for grades K–5 are available at the Kennedy Center (n.d.). This is a *free resource* that can be searched by keyword (we recommend “tolerance” or “empathy” or “diversity”) or age group.
  - In the lesson “[America, a Home for Every Culture](#),” which is tailored to grades 3–4, students will reflect on other cultures and look at the mosaic that is American culture.
  - “[Comparing Cultural Holidays](#)” teaches tolerance through a comparison of the artistic and cultural traditions of Halloween in America and El Día de los Muertos in Mexico.

- A third-grade teacher uses role-play and moral dilemmas to help his students develop and strengthen empathy (Upright, 2002). A dilemma that he has used with his students (“The Flood Story,” p. 18) involves a young girl who ventures outside after a heavy rain and flooding. Her mother tells her to be careful and avoid water, but the girl sees a cat caught in the tree. She would have to cross water to rescue it. Students discuss what the girl should do and why.
- The Kindness Curriculum, free after [signing up](#) on the site, is a 12-week program for pre-K children that teaches them how to cultivate kindness.
  - The lessons are designed to be practiced twice a week for 20 minutes. The 24 lessons are broken into eight themes—1) Mindful Bodies and Planting Seeds of Kindness, 2) I Feel Emotions on the Inside, 3) How I Feel on the Inside Shows on the Outside, 4) Taking Care of Strong Emotions on the Inside and Outside, 5) Calming and Working out Problems, 6) Gratitude, 7) All People Depend on Each Other and the Earth, 8) Gratitude and Caring for Our World and Wrap-Up.
  - The free download also contains links for teachers to prepare themselves for teaching the Kindness Curriculum.
- To prepare students for collaborations in a diverse world, [the Ashoka Changemaker curriculum](#) includes the Start Empathy Initiative, with an emphasis on teaching students in grades K–6 the importance of empathy. The free resource materials are available for teachers, caregivers, youths, and school districts and can be searched by type, category, or keyword.
  - Teachers can start with [a free toolkit](#) that includes tool cards, an empathy roadmap, and detailed lessons with information on when to give the lesson, how much time is needed, and the materials needed for each grade level.
- Diversity in education is an incredibly important component in fostering empathy in children. For help in finding diverse lessons, [Multicultural Lesson Plans and Resources](#) provides a clearinghouse of multicultural lesson plans and resources (Sass, n.d.).
  - [The Museum of Tolerance](#) (n.d.) provides free downloadable teachers’ guides that explore topics (Common Core aligned for grades 3–12), such as the power of words and images, dynamics of discrimination, pursuit of democracy and diversity, and personal responsibility.

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