

Selfie-Centered Kids? How to Teach Empathy with 5 Quick and Easy Activities

Research shows that there's a **startling decline in empathy** among kids. And in a world where capturing the perfect selfie, garnering likes and followers, and achieving social media fame are highly valued, it's not hard to see why kids are becoming *selfie-centered*. This is especially concerning because **empathy is a powerful tool kids can use to reject pornography!** The good news is we can teach empathy to our kids! And when children develop empathy, it's easier for them to understand *why* porn is wrong and hurtful. Be sure to see the **5 easy activities to teach empathy** below.

How we got here

Dr. Michele Borba, Ed.D. explores the topic of empathy in children in her book [UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World](#). Dr. Borba states that, "Among today's youth, there's a measurable dip in empathy, clear increase in peer cruelty, more cheating and weaker moral reasoning, and our plugged-in, high-pressure culture is leading to a mental health epidemic among young people." (Borba, xv-xvi).

In order to begin to reverse those effects, we need to explore how we got here as a society in the first place. While there are lots of contributing factors, we will explore four that have contributed the most to a decrease in empathy in children and teens:

1. Over-emphasis on self-esteem leading to self-absorption
2. High pressure to succeed
3. Increase in screen time
4. Damaging effects of social media

1. Self-Esteem vs. Self-Absorption

[The '80s and '90s saw a big push for teaching self-esteem and helping kids understand the value of themselves](#). Schools adopted self-esteem building curricula. It was a major theme in sports programs, parenting advice, and children's books as well.

And it *is* important. Kids who have self-confidence are better able to stand up for themselves and others and are better equipped to handle setbacks and failures. It became an issue when society took this concept to the extreme. Parents, schools, and sports programs began to over-value and over-praise children.

"Overinflating kids' egos poses problems: First, the more kids hear those accolades, the more they *need* them. And second, kids who feel entitled **believe the world owes them special treatment.**" (Borba, 29-30). The result? When kids believe they are 'more special' than others, it's harder for them to value the opinions and feelings of others.

2. The pressure to succeed

On the flip side to over-inflating kids egos, society has also created a great deal of pressure to succeed—whether it's in sports, music or coding classes.

Kids are also encouraged to take college courses while in high school and to be involved in as many school clubs as possible. All of this is supposed to give kids a competitive advantage over their peers as they apply for colleges, scholarships, and jobs.

And while most of these activities are good and provide kids with amazing opportunities, parents are feeling the pressure to give their kids *every* opportunity to get ahead in life. While a child might benefit from being involved in one or two of these activities, **the pressure to do *all* the things and to be the *best* at them can be overwhelming.**

All of this is sending kids the wrong message. Check out the results of a Harvard survey of 10,000 diverse middle and high school students:

- 80% of students chose **'high achievement or happiness'** as their top priority and said the most important task assigned to them by their parents is to 'succeed'.
- Only 20% of students chose **'caring for others'** as their top priority.
- Those who gave caring low priority tended to also **score low on a scale for empathy.**
- 80% of teens said **their parents cared more about achievement or happiness than caring.**
- Kids were **3 times more likely to agree** than disagree with the statement: "My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my class than if I'm a caring community member in class and school." (Borba, 124).

Now you know the bad news, the good news is that we can re-tune our messaging to place a higher value on empathy. Make sure to see the 5 activities listed below!

3. Too much screen time

We're learning more and more about [the negative impacts](#) that too much screen time has on our children.

Decreased empathy is one of those negative effects. The very foundation of empathy centers on face-to-face human interaction. "Too much online communication means that our kids will be less equipped to develop skills to navigate their social world," (Borba, 9).

When we interact with others through the screen, it's easier to objectify them instead of humanizing them. This is why it's easier for people to type things they'd never say in person. Or watch videos where others are being harmed. Or

consume pornography. This all leads to more bullying and other harmful behavior on *and* off the screen.

*Related: [Screen Time and the Brain: Expert Advice on Electronic Addiction and Teaching Kids Healthy Tech Habits](#)
[Screen Time and Mental Health: Simple Life Hacks for Raising Resilient Kids](#)*

4. Social Media

It's not hard to see how social media has fostered a selfie-centered society. Getting the perfect selfie, garnering likes and followers, and seeking to be "YouTube" or "TikTok" famous have become of paramount importance.

Dr. Borba calls this "**Selfie Syndrome.**" It's..."all about self-promotion, personal branding, and self-interest at the exclusion of others' feelings, needs and concerns. It's permeating our culture and it's why we must get kids to switch their focus..." (Borba, xv). Screen time and social media are not only teaching our youth to objectify others, but it's also **teaching kids to objectify themselves.** One staff member at Protect Young Minds shared the following story:

At my church I have the opportunity to work closely with girls ages 13-18. One night as the girls waited for an activity to begin, I sat quietly in the corner observing. I was shocked at the selfies they were taking. Shirts pulled down slightly to expose cleavage, lips puckered and the phone at an unusually high angle—making sure the photo captured a glance down the shirt. Hair flipped and tossed, then tossed again and the angles of the camera always placed to fixate on the sexual parts of the body. They could do this for hours.

Then they post and wait.

"Already got a like!" one shouts to the other.

"I got one too!" The other screams in return.

It was clear to me that this is a frequent competition they play with each other – who can get the most likes the fastest?

*And it doesn't stop there. I've had the opportunity to work with young individuals before, and now more than ever I am seeing **a trend towards self-centeredness and an inability to think of others.** It has become more and more clear that teens are living in a "selfie-centered" generation.*

Why it's so important to teach empathy

The good news is that **we can teach empathy** to our kids. We simply need to focus on it. "The problem is that empathy is widely underestimated by moms and dads, as well as the general public, so **it's low on most child-rearing agendas**" (Borba, xiii). But it shouldn't be.

As previously mentioned, there's a great deal of pressure on parents to help their kids succeed in academics and extracurricular activities as they believe it will help them get ahead in life.

If we're **following science instead of the hype**, we know empathy is a better indicator of success in every area than emphasis on grades and extracurriculars. Research shows that the ability to empathize is a positive predictor of

- Math and reading scores
- Critical thinking skills and
- Preparation for the global world

And it affects our kids' future

- Health
- Wealth
- Authentic happiness
- Relationship satisfaction
- Resilience and
- Professional prospects

When you teach empathy kids are better equipped to reject bullying, racism, and pornography

Kids who feel empathy will more quickly identify bullying and racism and will be more likely to step in to help victims.

They'll also recognize the mistreatment of others found in today's pornography and will be more apt to reject it.

In the documentary [Our Kids Online](#), Garrett from Fight the New Drug shares how the empathy he was taught as a child was the wakeup call he needed to free himself from the trap of pornography. He shares how as a young man he had started to watch pornography. As time progressed, he began to watch increasingly more violent pornography. One day as he was watching, it occurred to him that he was actually watching *real* people. This was someone's daughter. Maybe someone's sister. He recalled that his parents had taught him to treat people with respect and that what he was viewing and supporting *went against that very core belief*. This realization was a turning point for him and **led him to seek help to recover from his porn addiction**. *Related: [Police Mom Reveals Secret Weapon to Protect Kids from Porn](#)*

Empathy can be instilled, and it is composed of teachable habits that can be developed, practiced, and lived. Empathy is what lays the foundation for helping children live one essential truth: We are all humans who share the same fears and concerns, and deserve to be treated with dignity

-Dr. Michele Borba, ed.d

Tips to teach empathy

There are so many great ways to teach empathy, but no matter what methods you use to instill this quality in your kids, here are some important guiding principles:

- **Teach it directly *and* indirectly.** *Direct teaching* means you set aside time to teach it, plan ahead, and clearly identify that the point of the activity is to learn kindness or empathy skills. (We'll give you some ideas for direct teaching at the end of the post!) *Indirect teaching* occurs during real life situations. When you observe kindness or unkind behavior, take the opportunity to discuss it naturally with your kids.
- **Practice it.** Empathy is like a muscle—it has to be exercised! Just teaching kids kindness and empathy skills won't make them kind and empathetic people. Give your kids specific challenges that provide them the opportunity to practice. The more they practice, the quicker kindness will become a habit!
- **Live it.** The best way to teach our kids about kindness and empathy is to *show* them. When parents don't show empathy to their kids, they are sending a message that empathy *isn't* an important trait. And the kids are watching how we interact with others. When parents behave badly at a sporting event, kids get the message that winning is more important than kindness. When parents over-emphasize getting good grades, kids learn that they should do whatever it takes to succeed, no matter the cost to others.

Addressing the sources of selfie-centeredness

Earlier we identified some of the sources of society's trend away from empathy. Addressing those sources in your own family will be a powerful step towards increased empathy:

- **Consider where you may be overpraising** and overvaluing your kids. It's good to be a proud and supportive parent, but make sure your child isn't receiving the message that he's more special than others and that his needs/wants/ideas are more important than others.
- **Make teaching empathy a priority**—higher than academic achievement or talent in athletics or the arts. Make sure your kids know that kindness matters in your family.
- Think about your **family's media habits** and consider whether your family may need to decrease screen time. Here are some [tips for managing screen time](#).
- Think carefully before **allowing your child to have a social media account**. [We don't recommend social media for anyone under 16](#)—maybe even older

depending on your kid—and at that point we recommend teaching kids appropriate social media use in a very *intentional* way. If your kids are already on social media, [invite your kids to consider how social media makes them feel](#).

5 activities that teach empathy

There are SO many great activities for kids to develop and practice empathy, it's hard to choose just 5!

- The first three on our list will help your kids **learn to see things from the perspective of others**—an important empathy building skill!
- The last two focus on **turning kindness into a habit**. And be sure to check out our reading list for parents at the end of the article for more great ideas.

1. Read fiction to teach empathy

Research shows that “people who read fiction are more capable of understanding others, empathizing, and seeing another person’s point of view than those who read nonfiction...and the more stories young children had read to them, the stronger their ability to imagine what other people are thinking and feeling” (Borba, 78-79).

Read together.

As you read, choose a character and ask questions such as

- How do you think that character is feeling? How do you know?
- Would you feel the same way if that happened to you?
- What could you do to help if that character were your friend?

Tip: Don't stop too many times to ask questions or you'll disrupt the flow of the story and your child may lose interest.

Help your child learn to love to read.

For some kids, this comes naturally; for others it's the *last* thing they want to do. Here are some tips:

- When reading for enjoyment, help your child **find books at or a little below their reading level and that they may be interested in**. Find a recommended reading list for your child's age online or ask their teacher or a librarian for tips.
- As much as kids love screens, studies show that **kids enjoy reading less when it's on a screen!** When possible provide your kids with *actual* books. Your local public or school library are great resources. Thrift stores or used bookstores are great as well.

- Provide an **enjoyable place to read**. A reading corner with pillows or a bean bag chair, a hammock, or a special chair or couch designated as a reading zone make great choices.
- Even when your child reads a book on her own, you can still **ask her about the book** and how certain characters feel.

Book suggestions

While *any* fictional book can provide opportunities to discuss how characters are feeling, certain books lend themselves to the practice of perspective-taking more easily. Here are some of our favorites:

- *Stellaluna* by Janell Cannon
- *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?: A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids* by Carol McCloud
- *The Sneetches* and *What Was I Scared Of?* (Available in one book *The Sneetches and Other Stories*) By Dr. Seuss
- *We're All Wonders*, *Wonder*, and *Auggie & Me: Three Wonder Stories* by R. J. Palacio
- *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan
- *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry

2. Use props to teach empathy

The phrase, “walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” can be a fun way for kids to start thinking of things from another’s point of view. You can use this activity when there is real life conflict or after reading a book or watching a movie.

Here’s how:

- **Gather shoes** Use different styles and sizes.
- **Label the shoes** Using a post-it note or other paper, label each pair of shoes with the name of someone involved in the situation or a character from the book or movie.
- **Take turns stepping in the shoes** On each child’s turn, they step into the shoes of their choice. Ask the child to explain what’s happening from the perspective of the shoes he’s standing in. How is that person feeling? What does that person need? How would you have handled the situation if you were them? Give each person a turn until all the shoes have been stepped in.
- **Additional props** You could use more than just shoes as well. Provide kids with other props that will help them take on the role of someone else.

3. Family meetings

Family meetings can be used in a variety of ways, but in this case we are using them to help our kids learn to see things from another's perspective.

Sometimes family meetings are held at a specific time and frequency. Other times you might call an emergency meeting. Before your each meeting, be sure to make some rules clear:

- **Only one person talks at a time and everyone gets a turn.** You might have an object that gets passed around and only the person holding it can speak.
- **Ask kids to take another perspective.** After they explain how they felt, ask them how they think someone else in the situation felt.
- **Ask kids to come up with solutions** that consider everyone's feelings.

4. Catch them being kind

In order to place more emphasis on kindness than achievement, be sure to catch your kids being kind and recognize them for it! Be sure to ask them how they felt when they were kind. Ask how they think the receiver of kindness felt.

Here are some ideas for recognizing kindness:

- **Kindness chain/wall/jar:** When you recognize an act of kindness from a child, point it out right away! Your family could have a kindness chain where you give them a slip of paper and write what the act of kindness was then attach it to a chain. See how long the chain can get in a month! Or you might try to fill up a jar or have a wall where you pin up acts of kindness.
- **Dinner conversation** Each person takes a turn describing a kind act they saw someone else do that day.

5. Random acts of kindness

To get kids in the habit of serving others, give your family a "Random Act of Kindness" challenge. There are lots of ways to do this:

- **One a day/week.** Challenge your family to do one random act of kindness each day or week.
- **All in the family.** Each week assign each member of the family another family member. Encourage them to see how many acts of kindness they can do for that person that week. At the end of the week, switch.
- **Pick a person.** Similar to the one above, put the names of people from your family and others you know in a jar. Or you might write more generic things like "a neighbor", "a grandparent", "a friend" etc. Each week everyone in the

family pulls out a slip of paper and then performs an act of kindness for that person.

- **Family project.** Plan activities to do as a family to show kindness to others. [Here's a great list of ideas](#) of random acts of kindness, but we bet your kids will have some great ideas on their own!

Final thoughts on why it's so important to teach empathy

There's no doubt about it—we're immersed in a selfie-centered culture. The good news is that we can start to reverse that culture in our own homes, classrooms, schools and communities.

When we send kids the message that **kindness matters** and give them **tools to strengthen their empathy muscles**, we'll see them shine!

There's no better way to teach our kids to reject bullying, racism, pornography and divisiveness. And kids who learn empathy will be happier and more successful in every aspect of their lives.

Some of our favorite books for tips on how to teach empathy

- *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* by Michele Borba, Ed.D
- *How to Raise Kind Kids: And Get Respect, Gratitude, and a Happier Family in the Bargain* by Dr. Thomas Lickona
- *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings* by Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MS Ed, FAAP with Martha M. Jablow and published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Particularly Chapter 26 on *Character*.