

Make Sure to Exercise This 'Muscle' in Your Children Frequently

Every week we remind ourselves and each other that it's most natural to talk about ourselves—but that we can't be focused on ourselves and focused on our friends at the same time. Holding the "respond creature" helps our brains focus back on others. The practice of empathy is becoming more and more familiar for these little guys. One week, one of our summer college interns was in town for fall break. He had relationships with several of these young men from our summer programs, and I asked if he'd spend Monday afternoon with us. The boys were excited to see this remarkable young man, and we spent some of our check-in time test-driving empathy with him.

One by one, the boys asked him questions about being in college and commented on something he'd shared about his feelings of living away from his mom and dad for the first time in his life. It was a gift for me to watch these young boys flexing the empathy muscle with someone outside of our group.

One little boy was struggling to come up with something. The respond creature had traveled all the way around the circle, and it was obvious to everyone in the group he hadn't taken his turn. Not wanting to miss a turn, but not having any idea what to say, he simply looked up at the young man and said, "I have a teenage brother, and he has the disease called acne that you have where you get those big red bumps all over your face. I know it makes him feel sad, and so I feel sad with you."

His comment caught us both off guard. I hesitated, not knowing quite where to go from there. You have to give this 7-year-old

an A+ for effort. It was an earnest attempt at empathy. Before I could speak, my college-aged friend jumped in with, “You are absolutely right—I do have acne and it does make me feel sad sometimes. Thank you for being so understanding and supportive.”

Responding with empathy is more naturally instinctive for some individuals than others. Just as one child might be stronger in math and another in spelling, we all bend in certain directions. Some of us are more extroverted, some more introverted. Some more analytical, some more creative. We could circle around the nature vs. nurture argument for days, months, or years. Bottom line—both are contributing factors.

Some individuals more naturally think of others, and some more naturally think of themselves. During adolescence, we all spend more time thinking about ourselves. Sadly, some adults never move beyond that tendency. We believe the milestone of empathy is like a muscle. That muscle may naturally be weaker or underdeveloped in some kids and more developed in others. The good news is, the more we exercise weak muscles, the stronger they get. {eoa}

*Excerpted from Are My Kids on Track? by **Sissy Goff, David Thomas** and **Melissa Trevathan** (Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016). Used by permission.*

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