Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another.
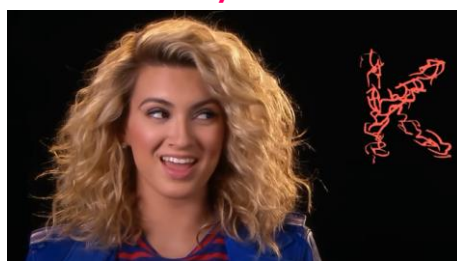
Alfred Adler

Kindness and Empathy

How to Build Empathy and Kindness to Strengthen Your School Community

Empathy is a powerful tool that can help you better understand what's driving your students' behavior and find strategies to help. It can also help you connect and work through difficult moments together. As a key part of being a responsible, empathy can help students become better community members at school and elsewhere. Students who show empathy are less likely to bully others. Empathy can also be a route to academic and career success because it helps people understand and work with others. They are peaceful, productive, and positive places where all teachers can teach, and all students can learn. Although it doesn't necessarily take a lot of work to build empathy, it does take attention and commitment – but its worth it for students, educators, and the school community. Studies show that when students practice empathy, they display more classroom engagement, higher academic achievement, better communication skills, lower likelihood to bully, less aggressive behaviors and emotional disorders and more positive relationships. (Harvard.edu, 2022)
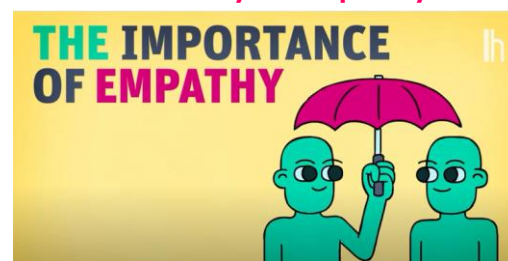
Videos

Elementary – Empathy	Elementary – Kindness	Secondary – Empathy	Secondary - Kindness
Sesame Street: Mark Ruffalo: Empathy		THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY	AND WE CAN TREAT PEOPLE WITH KINDNESS

Five Essential Steps for Building Empathy

1. **MODEL EMPATHY**
   - When frustrated with students, pause, and take a deep breath and try to see the situation from their perspective before responding.
   - When a student is upset, use active listening skills, and reflect back his feelings or the rationale for his behavior before redirecting the behavior.
   - Be aware of students' non-verbal cues and follow up on them. For example, if a student is slumping in her chair and appearing withdrawn or angry, say something like "I noticed that you are quieter than usual today. Is something bothering you?" rather than immediately reprimanding her; I-statements.
   - Ask for students' input when appropriate and feasible (for example, when establishing classroom rules or generating ideas for group projects) – and really listen. Find opportunities to incorporate their feedback and respond to their needs.

2. **TEACH WHAT EMPATHY IS AND WHY IT MATTERS**
   - Clearly explain that empathy means understanding and caring about another person's feelings and taking action to help. Explain how it improves the classroom and school community.
   - Stress the importance of noticing and having empathy for people beyond immediate friends, including those who are different or who are too often invisible.
   - Give examples of how to act on empathy, such as helping, showing kindness, or even simply listening.

3. **PRACTICE**
   - Create opportunities to practice taking another's perspective and imagining what others are thinking. Play charades and do role plays, read, and discuss books, and use "what would you do" style vignettes or case studies.
   - Name the barriers to empathy, like stereotypes, stress, or fears of social consequences for helping an unpopular peer. Share specific strategies to overcome them. For example, encourage students to privately offer kind and supportive words to a student who was bullied.
   - Foster emotional and social skills, like dealing with anger and frustration and solving conflicts. Use Character Education lessons, and Youth Mental Health First Aid practices to teach specific routines for calming down and resolving disputes. Ask your school counselors, social workers, psychologists, behavior teachers and ESE specialists for help; Big/Little Problem WS,

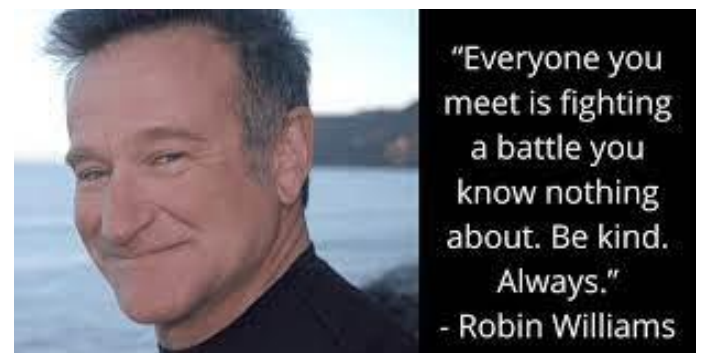Click HERE for school highlights and to meet DSS personnel.

4. **SET CLEAR ETHICAL EXPECTATIONS**
   - Be clear that you expect students to care about one another and the entire school community. Don't just put it in the mission statement or on a poster – talk about it, model it, praise it, and hold students to it; elementary & secondary.
   - Do an exercise with students to help them reflect on who is inside and outside their circle. Discuss why and how they can expand the circle of who they care about.
   - Establish specific guidelines for unacceptable language and behaviors. Ban slurs or hurtful language like "that's retarded" or "he's so gay," even when said ironically or in jest — and step in if you hear them. Encourage students to think about why these words can be hurtful.
   - Enlist students in establishing rules and holding each other accountable.
   - Use restorative justice practices and peer mediation when conflicts arise; school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and administrators can assist; elementary & secondary.

5. **MAKE SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE A PRIORITY**
   - Collect data from students and staff at least once a year about whether they feel safe, respected, and cared about at school.
   - Take time to examine the data and make efforts to address problem areas identified by students and staff.
   - Avoid over-emphasizing comparative evaluation, getting ahead by beating others, or other pressures that can erode trust and undermine empathy. (Harvard.edu, 2022)

> "Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always."
> - Robin Williams

Additional Resources

Resource	Description	Grade Level	Educator	Family
Perspective Taking	Video for Elementary students on perspective taking	K – 5	X	X
Perspective Lesson with Sarah Giles	Lesson about perspective	4-8	X	X
Building Empathy	Dr. Michele Borba describes how families can build empathy	ALL		X

Ms. Kit Humbaugh
Director of District Student Services
humbaughk@citrusschools.org
(352) 527-0090 ext. 6301

Mrs. Jennifer Greco
Coordinator of District Student Services
grecoj@citrusschools.org
(352) 527-0090 ext. 6301

Mrs. Mindy Melito
Program Specialist for Behavioral Health & Social Emotional Learning
melitom@citrusschools.org
(352) 527-0090 ext. 6311

Mrs. Barbie Bogart
Behavior Teacher on Special Assignment
bogartb1@citrusschools.org
(352) 527-0090 ext. 6310

Providing support and creating opportunities through targeted services for students and families while maximizing student potential and creating a safe, positive learning environment.