



Empathy and the Preschooler – the Role of Teachers and Parents

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Empathy is a concept introduced in 1909 by psychologist Edward Tichener.¹ According to him, empathy is the ability of one person to recognize and share the emotions of another person. Most of the modern authors expand the meaning of the concept and associate it with emotional sensitivity and altruism, with tolerance towards other people. Other authors see it as an act of compassion. In this aspect, empathy acts as a kind of sensory knowledge, the ability to step into another person's shoes, to understand the affective orientations of others.

Many authors consider empathy, an emotional response to the condition of another, as a basic and sufficient manifestation of empathy.

In the modern psychological literature, the term "empathy" corresponds to a wide range of defining qualifications ("empathic interaction", "empathic reactions", "empathic abilities") and synonyms ("altruism", "prosocial behavior", "social sensitivity").

Empathy has an emotional and social nature and as such can be formed purposefully.

This makes empathy an extremely useful skill that should be formed at early school age².

Empathy is formed and manifested in situations of dialogic communication when the pupil acts not only as an object but also as a subject of interaction.

Empathy, like any emotional phenomenon, is susceptible to development. In child development and upbringing there are two successively developing forms of empathy – empathy as a directly impulsive form of response to the other, and sympathy – a conscious response to a real-life situation.

The use of role-playing games as a method for forming empathetic personalities is directly related to the emotional development of pupils in early school age. Role-playing, imitating a psychological and pedagogical situation that requires a manifestation of pedagogical empathy, can serve as an effective means of developing emotional and social intelligence in pupils. For example, role-play through its content and organizational and methodological support creates the prerequisites for empathic behaviour.

According to psychologist and pioneer in the field of emotions – Paul Ekman³, three different types of empathy are identified:

¹ EDWARD BRADFORD TITCHENER. Introspection and empathy. (1909)

² Ivanov, S. Empathy development in school environment. Study of the Institute of Cultural Heritage, 2020



Cognitive empathy, also called “perspective behaviour.” This is the ability to understand and predict the feelings and thoughts of others by imagining oneself in their situation.

Emotional empathy. It is closely related to cognitive empathy and is the ability to feel what another person is feeling, or at least to feel emotions similar to theirs. There is always a certain level of shared feelings in emotional empathy.

Compassionate empathy. Guided by their deep understanding of the other's feelings and based on shared experiences, compassionate people make real efforts to help.

The empathic response to others in the presence of tragic circumstances can be beneficial to others, but it can also go in the wrong direction and turn the individual into what James Doe⁴ calls "emotional parasites."

Empathy may lead to emotions that can harm a child's development. In this regard, it is necessary to use appropriate psychological and pedagogical approaches that lead to the development of "conscious" empathy. Thus, the emotional state of the child will be preserved and no psychological trauma will be inflicted. Therefore, the role of the preschool teacher in the

formation of empathy as part of emotional development is extremely important.

An important characteristic of empathy is the pupil's ability to value and respect the feelings of other children. This means the pupil's ability to treat others with kindness, dignity, and understanding.

Apart from the important role of the teacher in the formation of empathy in children, the family is a key factor. Therefore, children need to see empathy in all of them – parents, siblings. This is transmitted through the way parents treat their children. Parents, who are interested in the things that matter to their children and respond positively and with concern to their emotions, teach them the skills to be empathetic. When children's emotional needs are met, they learn how to meet the emotional needs of others, but at the same time are confident in what they receive themselves.

But for children to show empathy, they must, first of all, receive it. Therefore, parents need to talk to their children about emotional needs or something related to emotions, how to deal with emotions positively. Children need to learn to respect the emotions of others and to set an example of behaviour in a situation where they are required to respond to a certain emotion.

³ Paul Ekman. *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, Oxford University Press, 1994

⁴ James Dawes, *Evil Men*, Harvard University Press, 2013