

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**
S E R I E S

EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

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What are Empathy and Compassion?

Empathy is the ability to understand another's feelings and identify with that person's distress, while compassion is the willingness to act to alleviate the suffering of others. Empathy and compassion are closely related, and both are motivators for helping those in need and essential components of emotional and social development (McDonald & Messinger, 2011; Gilbert, 2015; Strauss et al., 2016).

Even though there are multiple ways of characterizing empathy and compassion, the most common descriptors include the following:

- ▶ Cognition
- ▶ Emotion

What are Empathy and Compassion?


Cognition

- ▶ Taking the perspective of other living beings into account
- ▶ Understanding others' experiences and emotions
- ▶ Differentiating between one's own and another's emotional states (i.e., self-regulation of emotions)
- ▶ Recognizing that all people experience hardship
- ▶ Focusing on the self and evaluating such self-representation against internalized standards of correct behavior, attitudes, and traits
- ▶ Being present; being aware of where you are, who you are

Emotion

- ▶ Feeling what others feel (emotional simulation)
- ▶ Being able to share another's positive or negative emotions
- ▶ Being able to respond affectively to another person
- ▶ Caring and being concerned toward others who are in pain
- ▶ Willingly supporting those in need
- ▶ Being able to avoid getting lost in others' pain
- ▶ Willingly listening to and paying attention to others who are suffering

Source: Based on a review of existing frameworks (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Singer & Klimecki, 2014).



A citizen of the 21st century with the skills of empathy and compassion, you should be able to do the following:

- ▶ See the world through the eyes of others
- ▶ Emotionally connect with people, feel what others feel, or share the feeling of others
- ▶ Understand what others feel or think and be aware of other people's needs and suffering
- ▶ Be compassionate, without assuming the suffering of others as if it were your own
- ▶ Respond affectively to someone experiencing a difficult situation
- ▶ Help or feel motivated to help those who suffer
- ▶ Show prosocial and altruistic behaviors, such as being generous, hospitable, sensitive, objective, and tolerant toward others
- ▶ Be sensitive to climate change and demonstrate behaviors and habits that directly or indirectly protect the environment and promote sustainable development
- ▶ Manage and resolve conflict in a way that shows respect and a sense of responsibility to the other person

Why Empathy and Compassion?

Empathy has an effect not only on prosocial behavior but also on work efficiency, making young people a more competitive source of labor (McKee, 2016). It fosters a culture of service, which means putting customers' or clients' needs first and seeking ways to improve their satisfaction and loyalty (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017).

Studies relating empathy to prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, sharing, donating, and other altruistic acts have yielded positive findings, especially in adults (Batson, 1991; as cited in Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Since we are hardwired to empathize, we will be able to confront our upcoming global challenges—such as global warming, pandemics, and war—with humanity's compassion (Ehrlich & Ornstein, 2012).

Furthermore, empathy and compassion play a fundamental role in conflict management and resolution in the family, school, and community. Given that they motivate altruistic behavior and strengthen learners' sense of self, as well as their ability to connect and collaborate effectively with others, these skills are key elements in educating the next generation of citizens (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017).

How to Develop Empathy and Compassion Skills?

Empathy is a skill that can be taught and developed in different ways and in different settings, such as educational programs in schools (Wang et al., 2003). Many educational initiatives aimed at improving empathy center on three main areas: (a) comprehending one's own emotions, (b) recognizing the similarities and differences between one's own feelings and those of others, and (c) developing interpersonal awareness and empathy (Castillo et al., 2013). Most of the interventions to develop empathy include activities such as role-play, debates, problem-solving, art, and games.

Likewise, interventions to promote compassion toward oneself and others have also shown encouraging results (Kirby, 2017). The empirically supported interventions that focus on cultivating compassion, although they were not implemented in school settings, include: compassion-focused therapy (CFT) (Gilbert, 2014), Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) (Neff & Germer, 2013), Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) (CCARE, 2015), Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB) (Kemeny et al., 2012), Compassion Meditation and Loving-kindness Meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Mindfulness has also been shown to help develop empathy and compassion. Mindfulness-based interventions have shown positive results in enhancing empathy and compassion among adults (Cheang et al., 2019). Unfortunately, research on children and youth is limited (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Despite this gap in the research, mindfulness-based education programs have recently been gaining ground in formal education. Most of them are focused on providing teachers with mindfulness skills through meditative practices, so that educators can share these techniques with their students (UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017).



Spain: The INTEMO Program



INTEMO is a two-year program comprising 24 sessions that uses emotional intelligence to reduce aggressive behavior and improve empathy among adolescents. The program helps develop the four abilities that make up emotional intelligence: (a) accurate perception, appraisal, and expression of emotions; (b) awareness of feelings and the ability to generate emotions to facilitate thought; (c) understanding and labeling emotions; and (d) regulation of emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). It operates on the premise that students who are able to perceive, understand, and manage their own emotions are more likely deal with other's emotions similarly, thereby developing positive social relationships and avoiding aggressive and disruptive behaviors. INTEMO was tested in eight Spanish public high schools in 2008: in each session, students were divided into groups and asked to engage in emotion-focused activities, including games, role-playing, art projects, film forums, and reflective activities. The program was shown to improve empathic abilities among males and to significantly reduce aggression, anger, hostility, and personal distress in adolescents (Castillo et al., 2013).




Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) Program

CMT is based on compassion-focused therapy, which has been shown to help improve prosocial behavior, cultivate compassion for the self and others, and improve social relationships (Maratos et al., 2019). CMT is more appropriate for groups sharing common problems than for individuals. The program is made up of six sessions. The first session focuses on explaining the basic concept of compassion and introducing two exercises: grounded, soothing breathing and self-talk with supportive expressions. The second session draws participants' awareness to the shame and self-criticism that they have experienced in the past. Sessions three to five allow participants to practice compassionate exercises, such as mind imagery, breathing, and role-play. In the last session, participants reflected on the program. CMT showed improvement in one UK school staff members' well-being. Likewise, teachers from Portuguese public-schools who participated in this program reported more compassion for themselves and others, more positive affect, and less anxiety and depression (Matos et al., 2022).

A woman with dark hair is smiling and looking down at a young child who is also smiling. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

How to assess and measure Empathy and Compassion?

Most tools to assess empathy and compassion are self-reported: that is, participants score several statements using Likert-type scales based on their personal experiences. The Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006) is a well-established tool used with adolescents and probably the most popular tool for measuring empathy worldwide (Zych et al., 2022, p. 1958). It has been successfully used in English (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006), Spanish (Villadangos et al., 2016), and Portuguese (Anastácio et al., 2016).



Likewise, the Compassionate Love Scale (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) has frequently been used to assess compassionate love toward two types of subjects: (i) for others close to the subject, such as friends and family; and (ii) for strangers and all of humanity (Chiesi et al., 2020; Schlosser et al., 2023). Unsurprisingly, individuals generally score significantly higher on the former than the latter. High scores on the Compassionate Love Scale are positively associated with empathy, helpfulness, volunteerism, and providing social support.

In recent years, there have been novel approaches to evaluating empathetic responses through neuroimaging techniques, in which images are shown to participants and their cerebral reactions to these stimuli are measured. However, this kind of assessment needs to be carried out within a lab setting and requires specific equipment, limiting its broader use (Geday et al., 2003; Moya Albiol et al., 2010).

RESOURCES:

- 🌐 [Brochure. Seamos Amigos en la Escuela](#)
- 🌐 [Website. Compassion-focused therapy](#)
- 🌐 [Website. Compassion meditation instruction](#)
- 🌐 [Website. Sinclair Compassion Questionnaire](#)
- ▶ [Video. Qué es la empatía y cómo desarrollarla en los niños: Rafa Guerrero, psicólogo](#)

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▶ [Video. The Power of Empathy: Helen Riess](#)

▶ [Video. Cómo enseñar empatía a los niños. Boris Cyrulnik, neuropsiquiatra](#)

▶ [Video. Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It](#)

▶ [Video. Empatía y alfabetización emocional, dos recetas para la infancia: Mary Gordon, educadora](#)

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