



BUILDING EMPATHY IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

Yale *Center for Emotional Intelligence*



Out-of-School Time (OST) settings provide unique opportunities to help youth become more empathic and compassionate toward each other. OST programs have more flexibility than school settings, both in terms of how youth are organized and in terms of program focus. OST programs are relatively free from the pressures of academics and provide youth with opportunities to explore their interests with others who share their passions. Perhaps most importantly, OST settings provide the time and space for staff to get to know youth, as well as opportunities for youth to meet and get to know other youth who may vary in age, culture, abilities, and interests. Because we tend to feel empathy more easily for people who are familiar, expanding youth's experience sets the stage for them to feel and express greater empathy.



WHAT IS EMPATHY?

What do people mean when they talk about empathy? Often, they are referring to kindness and caring. However, while it's true that people who are empathic are more likely to be kind and caring, empathy is more than that.

Psychologists define empathy as the ability to understand and feel what someone else is feeling. You've probably heard someone say that they can "identify with" another person. When they say this, they likely mean that they understand that person's experience and feel along with them - feel their pain or joy. That's empathy.

Empathy can motivate us to offer support to others and provides a pathway for creating a culture of caring. When promoting it is deliberate and part of the mission of an organization, it can be transformative. Through empathy, we gain a deeper understanding of another's experience and, as a result, we have a better idea of how to help.



STRATEGIES

FOR BUILDING EMPATHY IN YOUTH

Get to Know and Build Strong Relationships with Youth

OST settings provide the time and space for adults to get to know youth and to learn about their perspectives, interests, likes and dislikes, abilities, and struggles. Getting to know youth requires curiosity and patience, but the effort leads to greater understanding and empathy for them.

Asking simple questions when youth enter your program can be a first step. Noticing when youth seem upset or are acting in ways that are unusual for them and then taking time to check in can offer windows into their lives. Youth open up to us when we model the traits and actions we want them to adopt.

A particularly important aspect of getting to know youth is understanding their culture and beliefs about the world. In addition to deepening relationships with youth, understanding and appreciating their culture will strengthen their sense of belonging. And acknowledging and honoring differences goes hand in hand with cultivating a more empathic OST community.

It's equally important for adults to invest time in examining their own cultural exposure, upbringing, and deeply held beliefs about the world. Becoming aware of our biases and examining them intentionally provides insights into our interactions with youth and increases our ability to be responsive and accepting of differences.

Additional strategies for getting to know youth:

- **Honor different ways of communicating.** Young people have different comfort levels when it comes to talking about their personal experiences and expressing their emotions. Allow youth to choose whether or

not to share, and be aware of cultural differences that influence their communication styles.

- **Provide opportunities for youth to share aspects of themselves that might not come up otherwise.** Select activities and icebreakers that allow youth to share nuggets of information a little at a time. Over time, you will develop a deeper understanding of youth in your program.
- **Selectively share your own concerns and vulnerabilities.** For example, you might share that you are worried about your own son or daughter who has a cold or is struggling to learn to read, or perhaps an aging parent who needs support. Sharing about your life allows youth to feel a closer connection with you.
- **Pay attention to the events and concerns of the youth in your program.** Does someone have an important test coming up or a loved one who is unwell? Make mental notes so that you can (respectfully) check in with them. It can be as simple as, “How do you feel about your exam?” or “How’s your [friend/family member] doing? Is there anything you need?” The point is to show them that you care.

Establish a Safe and Supportive Climate

How youth feel while attending your program has a huge impact on their connection to your program and to the other youth who participate. Does your program offer a warm, supportive environment where youth feel physically and emotionally safe? Do they feel like their ideas and contributions are valued? Do they feel a connection with staff and other youth? A program that values and expects acceptance, kindness, and respect creates a climate in which all youth feel welcome. A program that values and addresses the emotional experience and needs of youth provides opportunities to build strong relationships and develop and practice empathy.

Strategies for building positive emotional climates:

- **Make kindness part of everyday routines.** When youth arrive, ask them, “What is something nice that someone did for you today? What kind thing did you do today?” Ask yourself the same questions. When you discuss kindness, focus on the effect the acts had on the recipient (“How do you think the person felt?”) and the giver (“How did you feel when acted kindly?”).
- **Recognize kindness.** Point out kind acts and let youth know that you see them as kind people. When they do something unkind, let them know that you view them as kind people who made a mistake. Helping youth develop an identity as a kind person instills the expectation that they will engage in kind acts in the future.
- **Have youth generate ideas about kind things they can do for others.**

Write them on slips of paper and put the papers in a box. Each day, or maybe when someone is feeling down, youth can draw a paper and look for opportunities to show kindness.

- **Provide encouragement and constructive feedback.** When youth step outside of program norms, view these experiences as learning opportunities rather than situations that require punishment. This does not mean there are no consequences, but the goal is to help youth learn and correct their mistakes.
- **Provide youth with leadership opportunities.** Not only does this help youth develop valuable skills, it communicates the value of their contributions and may encourage them to step in when they see others in need.
- **Provide opportunities for older youth to pass along program norms and values to younger youth.** These opportunities not only introduce younger youth to your program culture, they also solidify your program culture among older youth.

Model Empathy

For youth to learn the skills of empathy, they need to see it practiced by the adults in their lives. And because youth are more influenced by what we do than by what we say, modeling empathy is one of the most effective strategies for teaching it. When we empathize with youth, they develop trusting and secure connections with us. Those connections are key to their adopting our values and repeating our behavior, and can help to build their empathy for others.

Empathizing with youth can take many forms, including understanding and respecting their individual personalities, taking a genuine interest in their lives, and guiding them toward activities that reflect an understanding of the kind of people they are and the things they enjoy.

Opportunities to model empathy:

- **Take time to check in with youth.** When youth enter your program, ask how their day has been, how they are feeling, what has happened in their day, or if there is anything they need to make their time with you better? Take the time to really listen and validate their feelings.
- **Seize the opportunity to model empathy when you observe someone in distress.** It might be in real time, in a book or movie, or when reflecting on a recent situation or current event—whatever the situation, when you see someone experiencing intense emotions, take a moment to comment on or discuss what the person might be feeling. It can be helpful to begin by talking about what the other person is thinking – if we can understand what they might be thinking, we will have more insight into what they might

be feeling. Point out that the girl who missed the basketball shot looks frustrated, the boy who missed the bus looks disheartened, the child who dropped her candy looks disappointed or, in the case of a movie or book, make the discussion of empathy a central part of the activity.

- **Pay extra attention when youth are in distress.** When you see youth engage in disruptive behavior or withdraw from the group, take time to check in with them, ask what is going on, how they are feeling, and if there is anything you can do to help.

Help Youth Discover What They have in Common with Others

We all feel greater empathy for others we know well or who we perceive as similar to us. Our lack of familiarity with people in “groups” other than our own is a significant barrier to feeling empathy. Limited contact with people of different races, ethnicities, educational and cultural backgrounds, religions, and economic situations makes it more difficult to understand their perspectives and feelings.

Creating opportunities for youth to meet and get to know others who vary in age, culture, abilities, and interests helps build empathy. As youth get to know others and identify what they have in common, there’s a greater chance they can feel empathy for them when difficult situations arise.

Many of the strategies program staff use to get to know youth are also useful in helping youth get to know each other better:

- **Expose youth to a wide range of people and their cultures.** Guest speakers or activity leaders can introduce youth to different viewpoints and cultural beliefs. Exploring a range of holiday traditions and community celebrations can help youth understand and relate to each other, despite their differences.
- **Use intentional groupings to pair youth with others of different identities (whether racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual orientation, gender or something else).** Increasing familiarity leads youth to develop connections based on genuine sharing. The stronger the connections, the more likely youth are to show empathy.
- **Set up program exchanges with youth groups from different communities.** Racial and economic separation are common, and stereotypes thrive in the isolation community structures can create. Exposing youth to a wide range of people will help them gain an understanding of others and grow their empathy for them.
- **Create community biographies.** Design a program-wide art project where staff and students can post their self-portrait (photo or drawing) along with some interesting facts about themselves (e.g., birthday, favorite music group, desired super power [if they could have one]).

- **Regularly use activities and games that focus on sharing individual interests, experiences, and cultural beliefs and practices.** This can be done as an ice-breaker at the beginning of your time together each day or as a closing reflection at the end of the day.
 - Have youth form a circle and, in response to statements written by youth or program staff, step into the circle if the statement is true for them. Examples of statements can range from simple physical descriptors like height or eye color (“Step into the circle if you are the tallest person in your family,” or “...if you have seen the latest _____ movie.”) to more personal questions (“Step into the circle if you are an only child/have more than 3 brothers or sisters,” or “...if you take care of a younger sibling.”).
 - Identify a number of descriptors and ask youth to “find someone who... (insert common experience).” Youth mingle with their peers, asking if the descriptors fit them. You can expand this to include common fears, dreams, feelings, worries, and joys.
 - Stress Toss: Ask youth to anonymously write what is currently stressing them on a piece of paper. Next, youth crumple their papers into balls and toss them anywhere in the room. Youth then pick up a random paper ball, stand in a circle and take turns opening and reading the papers out loud. The goal of the activity is to surface the different challenges youth are dealing with and, through shared experiences, build empathy for others. The activity also provides an opportunity to offer support, advice, or simply acknowledge that one understands what that person is going through.

Include Service Learning and Volunteer Experiences in Your Programming

Help youth find an issue they are passionate about and plan a service-learning project to meet an unmet need in their community. Before beginning, guide youth through activities and conversations designed to bring understanding about the perspective – thoughts, beliefs, goals, and feelings – of the people who will benefit from the project.

Questions to guide your discussion can include:

- Who will benefit from our service-learning project?
- What do we know about community members’ experience with this challenge?
- What might they be thinking or feeling about it?
- Who can we reach out to and partner with in the community?

- What can we learn from this project?

As the project progresses, build in time to reflect on others' feelings – the recipients, the youth working on the project, even staff. The idea is to use the opportunity to create a web of connections that provide opportunities to understand a situation from multiple perspectives.

When possible, make service learning face-to-face so that youth are in direct contact with the people they are helping. Sometimes helping one person can be easier than taking on the needs of a larger group. It's also more likely to evoke empathy because the impact is so immediate.

Implement Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative justice practices have empathy at their heart. The goal of these practices is to help all involved express their own perspectives and emotions, hear others' perspectives, and engage in dialogue that aims to build understanding, explore how a behavior has impacted those involved, and develop agreements for what will be done to make things right. Because these discussions typically take place with participants sitting in a circle, they are sometimes called restorative circles. When harm is done, it is easier to repair once all perspectives and emotions are on the table.

The particular model of restorative practices adopted by your program should be determined by the structure of your program. Staff and youth may wish to practice the process to address relatively minor situations before taking on more serious ones.

Take Care of Yourself

Working with young people is a labor of love, but it's still labor. And it can be emotionally draining. Taking care of your own needs is critical to your ability to feel empathy for and meet the needs of the youth you serve. The basics are healthy habits—nutritious food, physical activity, and adequate sleep—but it needs to go further than that. Find ways to replenish your emotional reserves through hobbies, prayer or meditation, or connections with friends, family or a religious community. Even taking five minutes a day to journal or practice deep breathing can do wonders to recharge you.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to show empathy for yourself. Recognize that your work is hard and that you are going to make mistakes. When you're struggling, think about what a supportive friend might say to you and tell yourself the same thing. Forgive yourself and show yourself the compassion you show for others!