**The importance of perspective taking for young children**

**Source:** www.canr.msu.edu

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Seeing and understanding the world from someone else’s point of view is an important life skill. Learn why perspective taking is important and ways you can help children develop this essential skill.

Each individual experiences the world from their own unique perspective. Two or 200 people can experience the same event and have completely different experiences. Why is it important we understand someone else’s point of view?

We do not live in isolation and each person has to engage and work with others in order to be successful or get anything done. In order to work effectively with people, it’s incredibly important that we are able to engage in perspective taking. We need to understand how someone else sees the world to be able to work together, communicate and show empathy and understanding. It’s an expectation as an adult that you will listen to and respect the opinions and experiences of other people. It’s a crucial skill for all relationships, friendships and professional and romantic relationships.

### Perspective taking

In her book, “Mind in the Making: The seven essential life skills every child needs,” author Ellen Galinsky describes perspective taking as involving several distinct skills, including:

* **Determining how someone else feels.** In order to do this, we have to use our knowledge and understanding of someone while also ignoring our own opinions, thoughts or feelings and trying to figure out how the other person must be feeling or thinking.
* **Inhibitory control.** In order to think about the world from someone else’s understanding, we have to put our own thoughts on hold. When we use inhibitory control to engage in perspective taking, we are pausing our own desires to think of someone else.
* **Cognitive flexibility.** In order to switch up our perspective, we have to look outside the box of our normal thinking. This requires cognitive flexibility in helping us change the focus of our attention from ourselves to someone else.

Perspective taking is really a social-emotional-intellectual skill, in that it requires hard work from our brains and also utilizes empathy and understanding.

### Supporting the development of perspective taking

[Michigan State University Extension](http://www.msue.anr.msu.edu/) has some tips on helping your child learn and practice perspective taking.

* **Walk the walk.** Practicing what you preach can be harder than it seems, but practicing perspective taking with your child is good for you and them. It is easier to be fair and just if we take the time to see how a situation looks from someone else’s point of view. Young children learn by watching you, so when you show them the value of perspective taking, they will engage in it too.
* **Talk about feelings.** Anger, sadness and loneliness aren’t bad words. Talk about all feelings with your child and teach them that all feelings are valid. Try repeating your child’s words to you, describing what you see them doing, asking questions and letting them know you are there to talk if they want.
* **Acknowledge and respect feelings.** Children will be better able to understand others’ perspectives when they grow up knowing their thoughts, feelings and experiences were understood and respected. Engage with your child and reflect their feelings back to them, let them know you notice them and are there to help them.
* **Show them the other side.** When you see a stranger stop to help someone on the street, talk to your child about what each person might be feeling or thinking. Help them build connections between people’s actions and their motivations. It’s also important to help children understand how their behaviors affect other people. If your child throws a toy and it hits another child, help your child build that cause-and-effect connection by talking about how their actions impact other people or their environment.
* **Train your little detective.** Just like real-life detectives search for clues to solve a crime, people who are skilled at perspective taking look for clues to understand other people. Help your child develop these sleuthing skills by encouraging them to observe and evaluate other people’s actions or behaviors.
* **Encourage community**. Children learn to value and respect others through the building of community. Encourage your child not only to engage with others, but to work together, collaborate, problem solve and truly value their relationships with others. This mutual respect and sense of kinship will encourage your child to think about other people’s points of view.
* **Create a loving and warm environment.** When children are loved, respected and feel safe, they have the capacity and motivation to learn how to understand and respect the perspectives of others.

By teaching your child perspective taking skills, you are giving them all the tools they need to build healthy, happy and successful relationships throughout their lives.