# **The world needs less bullies, teach your kids empathy**

**Source: Sonal Kapoor, Founder Director, Protsahan India Foundation, Enthusiast Worker of POCSO Act against child trafficking**

As parents, you want the best for your children. You do whatever it takes to help them score straight ‘A’s. But amid the after-school classes, extra-curricular activities, latest gadgets and everything else it takes for them to “succeed” in life, you overlook the most essential life skill—**Empathy**.

Always question what values and ethics you are inculcating in your child, before blaming the kid from the RTE quota and having her/his character and class assassinated only because s/he comes from the nearby slum. Only if you are empathetic, can you raise an empathetic and emotionally intelligent child. Emotional intelligence has everything to do with a child handling their emotions, stress-pressure situations of bullying and come what may, with a strong head over strong shoulders.

Everybody perhaps cares but nobody cares enough. Not at least according to recent reports. It is found that every third child is bullied in school and some of these kids are affected to such an extent that they do not mind ending their lives, just to stop the pain. Bullying is a classic example of what it feels like to lack empathy. Would this be happening if children today imagined what another classmate goes through? Is it realistic to even expect a child to identify the distress of another in the first place?

## **Raising them right**

Children are not born good or bad by nature. But if you don’t condition them towards empathetic behaviour, they simply do not develop their emotional quotient enough to identify mean and nasty behaviour. It’s simple, if they have not seen or experienced it, how will they display it? If you teach your child to become individualistic in nature, (even though you do it unknowingly) naturally it becomes difficult for them to understand what it feels like to walk even a mile in someone else’s shoes. Naturally, it becomes difficult for them to experience another’s feelings and emotions.However, all is not lost. Empathy is not a fixed trait. It can be fostered, encouraged, and cultivated. Parents, teachers, and caregivers can play a vital role by showing warmth and compassion towards children whenever they can. This helps to raise empathetic and emotionally intelligent kids.

## **Show kids how to keep it real**

Being kind does not mean liking and speaking positively about everyone all the time. If someone was mean and inappropriate and your child says it out loud, acknowledge it. Talk about why the action was mean and make children understand that it is possible to make bad choices even if you are a good person. Tell them it is how you deal with the consequences of these bad choices that count.

## **Let caring for people take precedence**

There is a difference between caring for someone just for effect and genuinely looking out for someone. Children need to understand this in order to strike a balance between their own needs and the needs of others, whether it is something as drastic as standing up for a friend who is being bullied or something as simple as passing the ball to a teammate. Emphasise that treating people with respect and care is vital even if you’re tired, angry or distracted. Help them develop the ability to read facial expressions and body language.

## **Use the power of storytelling**

Stories have the power to change the world. Read all kinds of stories to your kids. It doesn’t have to always be happy ones. Talking about the difficult emotions characters in a book go through is a great way to enhance emotional awareness. Reading about emotions enhances the child’s ability to empathise with the characters and thereby the people in the world who resemble these characters.

## **See that your child’s emotional needs are fulfilled**

Your kid won’t be able to show empathy for someone else, if his/her own emotional needs are not met. S/he needs to know that someone is there for her/him first before s/he can offer emotional support to another individual. If they do something nice for someone say, “that was nice of you to be so worried about your friend. I’m certain it made him feel better when you were so kind to him”. Acknowledgement helps reinforce positive behaviour.

## **Empathetic conversations with kids**

Understanding the importance of empathy is one thing but knowing how to express it is a different ballgame altogether. Recognise the role you play. Instead of saying things like, “If you had studied harder, you would have done better”, say “I know the material is difficult for you but you really did not spend a lot of time studying. Next time, we’ll make a study plan and if you want my help, we can talk about it”. Rather than saying, “You did not clean up your room like I told you to so now you cannot watch the TV for a day”, say “I really expect you to do your chores but if you forget about it I can always remind you. If you do not know where to start, you can always ask me about it”. Just a slight change in approach makes all the difference. The children are always picking cues on how to live their life when they watch you, living yours.

When children learn to become empathetic right from an early age, they grow up to become considerate, responsible, and respectful adults who treat others with kindness and understanding. So instead of placing more importance on grades, grit, and scores and conveniently overlooking the flipside of the report card, pause and go back a few steps. Sure it’s great to recognise your child’s achievements and happiness, but don’t forget to give them a pat on the back when they care for others too.