

# Promote Empathy and Kindness in Kids

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Over the past several weeks, I have offered a program called *Gray for a Day* to several Family and Consumer Science high school classes across the Southwind District.

The main goal of this program is to teach participants how to have empathy and show kindness to those that struggle with sensory and functional challenges due to aging. At the beginning of the first session, one participant asked me why empathy is so important. I paused to think about that answer as opposed to stating the obvious.

The most notable reason would be that all individuals seek kindness, comfort, love, and support. If you were struggling to reach the top shelf at the grocery store, you would hope that a passer-by would notice and offer to help you. But it goes much deeper than that surface-level answer.

Empathy is the ability to notice, share, understand, and consider how others feel. It is a large part of social behavior and establishing healthy relationships. Being able to empathize creates stronger social connections as it drives you to help others. There are ways to establish this skill throughout a lifespan, but it is extremely critical to start at a young age.

For young children, this is a complex set of emotions they begin to learn and develop while sharing toys and spaces and reacting to others' feelings. One important thing to note is that children are impressionable and will model the behavior of those around them. By providing a good example for them to mimic, adults can help establish a behavioral pattern in young children.

To help support the development of empathy in children, adults can make examples out of others as they see them displaying positive behaviors. If they see unkind interactions, point that out to them and share how that might feel to others. Use verbal affirmations when you see a child do something kind and avoid giving treats or toys as a reward. This will diminish their motivation to engage in such acts. Let them make mistakes and learn from them. Help them understand how to correct their behavior so they can be better in future situations.

Empathy and kindness are critical skills for human development and healthy relationships at all ages. We can all work on enhancing this valuable skill. For more information, contact Cassidy Lutz at [celutz@ksu.edu](mailto:celutz@ksu.edu) or by calling 620-625-8620.

