

MGH Faculty Parents Group: The Development of Empathy in Children

by Ann Skoczenski, PhD, Program Manager, Center for Faculty Development

On January 30, 2014, the Office for Women's Careers, hosted a Faculty Parents Group talk on "The Development of Empathy in Children." The guest speaker was Helen Riess, M.D., Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Director of the Empathy and Relational Science Program in the Department of Psychiatry at MGH. Her research team conducts translational research utilizing the neuroscience of emotions, and they have developed an empathy training curricula that is implemented internationally in healthcare, as well as in business, and education.

Dr. Riess discussed the stages of empathy development from infancy into adolescence, and gave tips on how to model and encourage empathy in children:

- Infants and toddlers begin to learn about empathy from the way that we treat them when they are upset, cranky or in distress. Consoling them, talking softly, and relieving their distress are all ways to model empathy. At this stage, understanding their need for security and validating it with physical touch is key.
- Toddlers and pre-schoolers (as well as older children) are very sensitive to the physical signs that you are listening. Dr. Riess used a brief exercise in which participants paired up and briefly discussed an emotional situation, to demonstrate how our posture and gaze change when we are actively listening to someone. For children to learn empathic listening, Dr. Riess suggested that we remember to get on their physical level (e.g. by kneeling down), lean in toward them and mirror their posture and gestures. While these are all things that most parents in attendance were aware of, all agreed that when we are dashing to get home, get dinner on the table and get evening routines underway, we often rush past our children's need for empathic listening.
- The elementary school years are the time to add discussions about feelings to your interactions with your child. Help them to label their own and other's feelings, create opportunities to talk about hypothetical situations where someone might be upset, and help your child to understand their feelings. Middle childhood, roughly ages 8-10 years, is the stage where children really begin to appreciate that other people may have different feelings in response to the same situation.
- Adolescence often is accompanied by an apparent decline in empathy, as teenagers become very self-centered and concerned with posturing and developing a unique identity. This decline is temporary and is most evident in boys aged 13-15 years, and the most likely cause is an increase in testosterone during these years. This is also the age when boys may be feeling intense pressure to societal norms of "manliness," and may act aloof to avoid being overwhelmed by their own feelings. Dr. Riess suggested continuing discussions at home that encourage perspective-taking, as well as being very firm with family rules about respecting other people's feelings.

Additional information on this topic can be found in the following resources:

Helen Riess' TedX talk on "The Power of Empathy"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baHrcC8B4WM>

Tips for helping your child develop empathy

<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/social-emotional-development/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes.html>

From Mine to Ours: Nurturing Empathy in Children

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-sack-md/empathy_b_1658984.html

Decrease in empathy during adolescence

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304561004579137514122387446>