

Empathizing With a Bigger World in Your Own Backyard: How Parents Can Support a Child's Growing Social Awareness

The day my 8-year-old came home from school in tears because her friends had been making fun of a new student whose primary spoken language was not English, was the day I realized how important her emerging social awareness was becoming. Helping our children navigate the many differences and appreciate the amazing diversity this world holds is an opportunity to bolster their social and emotional skills. Empathy is a pillar of social awareness and a beautiful skill to watch blossom in your child.

From birth, our children are growing and exercising their social awareness, defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as the “ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures and the ability to understand the social and ethical norms for behavior.” CASEL further defines social awareness through the lens of equity. Children and teens are more likely to learn empathy when adults in their lives accept and value cultural differences and discuss power dynamics that disadvantage some and advantage others. If parents and those in a parenting role fail to discuss these issues with their children, they can perpetuate stereotypes and stifle social awareness skills.

Growing our children's social awareness involves preparing them to contribute to a diverse community. This requires recognizing and admitting our own biases. We must challenge our own thinking as we raise important questions for our children to consider. We must admit that we do not know it all -- that we always have more to learn. This vulnerability and willingness to face challenges while acknowledging we always have more to learn will aid us as we help our children learn the skill of perspective taking.

As children work to exercise their perspective-taking muscle, they will make wrong interpretations about others' thoughts and feelings. After all, no one is born a mind reader. Empathy requires practice. Our ability to show vulnerability not only models what our children are experiencing – “It's OK to not know it all” – but also opens the door to a more trusting connection between us where we are comfortable raising tough questions together.

There are many ways to help children become more socially aware.

0-5-Year-Olds: Practice physical awareness. Using toys, books from the library, children's shows, and friends from daycare and preschool, talk openly about differences and commonalities. Talk about visible differences like hair, skin color, physical disabilities, etc. as well as not-so-visible differences like traditions people celebrate, beliefs about a higher power, and the various types of families. Model acting with kindness and inclusion. If parents discuss differences and commonalities without discomfort, then children will not associate a sense of shame with the topic. This is not a shameful topic, and it is important to teach children to celebrate diversity as much or more as similarities.

6-8-Year-Olds: Act as a feelings detective. Children need practice naming/labeling their emotions in order to manage them and grow a sense of empathy for others. When your child comes home with a story about a classmate, ask: "How do you think they were feeling?" This simple practice promotes self-awareness, self-management ("name it to tame it"), and social awareness. Advance your conversations on inclusion and equity. Your child may encounter children from other cultures, races, and abilities for the first time in elementary school. Talk about these differences whenever the topic arises. Equate "different" with "opportunity to learn and value" not "weird."

9-12-Year-Olds: Share stories of fairness and justice. Children at this age are keenly attuned to issues of fairness. When friends make poor choices, ask "What other choice could they have made? How might things have turned out differently?" Point out ways in the larger world that individuals and cultures struggle for rights and talk together about ideas to address those big problems. Read age-appropriate biographies together about Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, or Rosa Parks to learn about those who risked their lives for justice.

13-18-Year-Olds: **Engage in powerful conversations.** Teens are ready to have powerful conversations about more complex issues. Every day in social media, movies, and daily experiences, they have opportunities to practice empathy. Ask your teen, “What would it be like in someone else’s situation? How would you feel? How would you react if you were them?” Ask them if they’ve seen people mistreated because of race, ethnicity, disability, etc. Ask how it made them feel and what they could do about it.

Practicing social awareness with your child helps open their mind to some of the world’s toughest issues of fairness and justice and will strengthen yours and your child’s empathy and compassion. You can make the world better from your own backyard!

Find more at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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