



em • pa • thy

*noun*

The ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and perspectives, and to use that understanding to guide our actions.

# Empathy

## Ethos of Learning

“Empathy and respect are well and truly alive amongst this group of Year 7s.”

Alex Wallace , Assistant Head

The teenage years can be, for all those concerned, a difficult time, often associated with door-slamming, eye-rolling and a profound insensitivity towards others - even in children who had not previously displayed such characteristics. As a consequence, many parents are concerned that they are at fault or that their offspring will never think of anyone but themselves.

Recent research has shown that nature, as much as nurture, has an impact on adolescent behaviour. Only 20 years ago, it was thought that the brain ceased developing in early childhood. The logical conclusion, therefore, was that children’s capacity for empathy had for the most part been formed long before the adolescent years. These ideas have since been largely discredited.

Brain-imaging and behavioural studies in recent years have shown that those regions of the brain associated with understanding others’ perspective do in fact continue to develop in adolescent years.

A study<sup>1</sup> which revealed that the social behaviours and skills which teenagers develop and acquire during adolescence have a formative impact on ongoing brain development.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore of University College London



### **Cognitive Empathy v Affective Empathy**

‘Cognitive empathy,’ defined as the mental aptitude to understand others’ perspectives, helps in problem-solving and avoiding conflict. Cognitive empathy begins around the ages of 13 and 15 in girls and boys respectively and continues to develop through later adolescence<sup>2</sup>.

“Affective empathy” is the ability to understand and respond to others’ feelings. Affective empathy starts in infancy when parents respond sensitively to babies’ emotions. Children become aware of and understand empathy by watching their parents and will experience it when adults respond positively to their needs and feelings.

Teenage boys may show a decline in affective empathy between the ages of 13 and 16<sup>3</sup> which may partly be explained by a sudden increase in testosterone during puberty; it is only temporary, however, and as quickly as it declines, it recovers in the later teenage years.



### **Identifying and Managing Empathy Issues**

The majority of adolescent boys feel pressure from within their peer group; the natural responses to this are manifold and may include detachment, toughness, humour and aloofness. Consequently, boys may suppress natural feelings of empathy in order to join in joking and teasing with their peers. Teenagers who seem aloof, hard-hearted or unkind may in fact be the opposite.

Fortunately, for both adults and children, scientific evidence points increasingly to the fact that the teenage years are the ideal time for adults to encourage teenagers to try and become aware of, develop and display feelings of empathy.

### **Ethos of Learning**

The second Learning Review highlighted many positive qualities which were frequently displayed in Year 7 boys. These included preparation, passion and collaboration. Those qualities less in evidence were relevance, respect and empathy.



Having said that, these skills were demonstrated regularly but perhaps we need to provide even more opportunities for our students to show such skills in class. I am certainly confident the Year 7s do possess these skills. I was recently taking a Year 7 Games period; during this time the boys had to sit in their forms and decide who was competing in which athletics events. Every boy in the form needed an event. I

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<sup>2</sup> Developmental Psychology

<sup>3</sup> Jolien van der Graaff of the Research Centre Adolescent Development at Utrecht University.

was working with 7MF at the time and I was so impressed by the respect they showed one another, there was no arguing, just mature discussion and support for one another. As it turned out one of the boys was away and they had not included him in the allocation of events. I spoke to the acting captain, whose immediate response was that he was happy to give up his place! Empathy and respect are well and truly alive amongst this group of Year 7s.

### **What can parents do to develop such skills?**

Far be it from me to inform you how to parent. I have two very young children and no idea what I am doing! However, it is the modelling of the desired behaviours that I believe your sons will benefit from most. What can you do at home?

- Regularly ask them to see their actions from other people's point of view. Over the years I have dealt with issues where boys have been unkind to other students. On the vast majority of those occasions, the perpetrator has no idea of the harm he has caused. Once they have their eyes opened they are incredibly saddened by their actions.
- Ask them to try and imagine themselves in other people's situation. As above they need to think how their actions impact on others.
- Manners; encourage them to be polite on all occasions. Even to their siblings!
- Adolescent-parent conflict is normal. Teenagers typically expect greater independence before parents are ready to grant it. Responsibility; encourage them to order the food on an evening out. Can they go to the shop and buy the milk and bread?
- Relevance; when an opportunity arises for them to use their learning in the real world make sure they use it. For example, can they sort out the bill? Can they calculate the price of the holiday? Can they describe the geographical features in the Lake District?

### **A final thought...**

Making mistakes, owning up to them and learning from it is good modelling for teenagers. If they see you having difficulties, resolving them and talking about it, it can be an example of how to overcome problems. No one is perfect - the world isn't perfect.



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*For further information on the Ethos of Learning please refer to the RGS website: [rgshw.com](http://rgshw.com) or Alex Wallace, Assistant Head, [arw@rgshw.com](mailto:arw@rgshw.com)*