

# EMPATHY & ACCOUNTABILITY: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

## WHAT IS EMPATHY & WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.

When other people act in ways that are unkind, most kids think it's their fault. This means they internalize negative interactions and can develop low self-esteem as a result, which can lead to acting out, holding themselves back, or being swayed easily by peer pressure. If children can learn to take a perspective of empathy, they realize: When other people act in ways that are hurtful or aggressive it means THEY are struggling and has nothing to do with ME. This way of thinking builds self-esteem, and it also helps children become more accountable for their own actions.

## TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD BUILD EMPATHY & ACCOUNTABILITY:

### 1. TEACH THEM TO BE OBJECTIVE

Help them understand that our actions always come from our own emotions – and are never anyone else's fault. You can use real life examples and self-reflections from your own family to help with this learning. You can say things like: "When you are hurting, you lash out, when I am hurting, I panic, when your sibling is hurting, they cry". Keep pointing out this link so they understand that they can never be responsible for anyone else's actions, and that they are always responsible for their own.

### 2. SEPARATE THEIR ACTIONS FROM WHO THEY ARE

When children are acting out or being unkind, their minds are overwhelmed and defensive, so it is very difficult to reason or rationalise with them. Give them space to calm down or encourage them to do a self-soothing activity, and then come back and talk about what happened calmly and compassionately. You can say: "I know you are a kind person, and I know you don't mean to treat me that way. What can we do to help you make different choices?" This is role modelling empathy, which teaches them to respond the same way to others.

### 3. HELP THEM SEE THE LINK BETWEEN HOW THEY ARE THINKING, FEELING & REACTING

You can draw it as a diagram for them - write their thought at the top of a page (eg "I'm not good enough") then an arrow to show how the thought causes them to feel a certain way (eg. sad), and then another arrow to show them how that thought and feeling cause them to act a certain way (eg. lash out at their sibling). Doing a similar diagram for yourself and other people in the family also helps to normalize this experience and remind your child that there is nothing wrong with them for having these reactions. This takes the shame out of the situation, which makes it much easier for them to become self-aware and make changes.

### 4. HELP THEM REFLECT ON THE ACTIONS OF THEIR PEERS

Once they are used to seeing their own actions and those of their family as simply a response to one's own thoughts and feelings, it's easier for them to reflect on where actions come from in others. When someone in their peer group or class is unkind, you can ask them "what could they have been thinking and feeling that made them act that way?" This perspective serves as a buffer to protect them from being impacted by negative interactions with their peers.