

Learning Empathy

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As we focus on a new year and a new administration, it is important for us to focus on the lessons we wish to teach our children the lesson of empathy. We can model this for them through our behavior, conversation and



priorities.

What is empathy?

A cousin of mine, who works as a housing advocate, sent me the following link that was shared with his office to teach about empathy. [This 3 minute video](#) reminds us that empathy means just listening and making a connection to those who need healing. We need not solve a problem. We need not try to make the problem go away. We need only demonstrate that we care through connection without judgment. The new year is the perfect time to practice and teach empathy. When we provide community service for others, we practice empathy. When we simulate handicaps, we put ourselves in others shoes, and we practice empathy.

Ideas for Practicing Empathy for Special Education students at the Elementary Level

Our local newspaper [described](#) how one elementary school provided opportunities for children to practice empathy.

These included the following simulations:

- To simulate physical disability, students drop a book and pick it up while in a wheelchair.
- To simulate dyslexia, students trace a star while looking in the mirror
- To simulate auditory processing difficulties, students follow auditory directions with progressively louder background noise, and instructions to hurry up.
- To simulate fine-motor problems, have students tie their shoes while wearing socks on their hands



Two Personal Examples:

A few years ago one of my adult sons had a serious accident and had to wear a large gray neck brace. In response my daughter prepared her daughter, who was barely two years old, for her visit with her uncle. She instructed her daughter to wear a gray scarf around her neck prior to the upcoming visit with her uncle. When my granddaughter saw her uncle, she was familiar with wearing something gray around her neck and felt comfortable with him.

Recently, one of my middle school students, who has cancer, was reading the *Outsiders*. Since his illness, he has learned to empathize with others with a maturity well beyond his years. He explained to me that Pony-Boy, a gang member character in the book, used street behavior to get food because he had no other choice in order to survive.

Please remember to practice and model empathy for our children. They are our most precious gifts.

Karen