

Teaching Your Pre-Teens and Teenagers Compassion

Scenario #1: *Your middle-schooler is talking about a kid who got hurt at school, and says, "He had it coming."*

Scenario #2: *Your middle-schooler is watching a news story about a school shooting, and says it is "boring."*

If you've ever been in a situation like this with your middle-schooler, you may have wondered, "Why didn't my child have any feelings of sorrow?"

It is common for middle-schoolers to lack sympathy and understanding. One reason is that, developmentally, most are self-centered at this age. They think mostly about themselves, and not others. Another is, most cannot fully understand complicated emotions, and they won't until their late teens or early twenties.

However, there are things you can do to help your pre-teens and teenagers develop compassion.

- ❁ **Keep the lines of communication open.** While staying calm, ask questions, such as, "Why do you think that?" Actively listen to his/her response.
- ❁ **Show your own feelings more.** Crying in front of children is not a sign of weakness.
- ❁ **Tell your son or daughter how the things they say or do makes you feel.** For example, "When you say _____, I feel _____, because... (give reason)."
- ❁ **Say, "I'm sorry."** When you make a mistake, express regret.
- ❁ **Show you care about other people.** Go out of your way to help others. Ask your children to join you in your efforts.
- ❁ **Teach empathy.** When someone is teased, hurt, or has a loss, ask, "How would you feel if you were in that situation?"
- ❁ **Encourage journal writing.** Writing about her own feelings can help your daughter become sensitive to others' feelings.
- ❁ **Praise caring and unselfish behavior.**
- ❁ **Be patient.** Learning emotions such as sympathy takes time.

This tip sheet was adapted, with permission, from the April 2002, **Parents Still Make the Difference!**, Middle School Edition Newsletter by The Parent Institute, a division of NIS, Inc.