

Hello! Since my last communication I have facilitated more than 20 empathy groups with the students of Boulder Creek Elementary and the Charter school. It's been great to spend time with so many students and teachers. I have had fun participating in the special dynamics that make up classroom groups. It has definitely been a learning experience!

Just to let you know, the children in this district are pretty good at empathy.

I came to the students with a daunting task: Sit and listen to your classmates. Share when it is your turn. Listen with open ears, open eyes and an open heart. I did not approach any class with an exact agenda, other than I wanted to assess their current abilities to process things in a group and to make some points about empathy. I can say for sure that there was not one dull moment in any group. From kindergarten all the way to 12th grade, most students were anxious to share their experiences and worked hard to hold space for their peers. I asked groups to answer different questions, depending on their age: "What's your favorite thing about school?", "Why do you come to BCE", "What gets in the way of having a great day at school?", "Talk about a time when you felt empathy for someone, or talk about a time someone felt empathy for you"

To iron out some communication basics, we talked about about 'real listening' vs. 'fake listening' before starting group conversations. Students of all ages waved their hands in the air when I asked about this - they knew exactly what I was talking about:

"Fake listening is when you look at someone when they are talking, but you are thinking about something else."

"Fake listening is like this: (looks at pretend phone while saying 'uh huh, uh huh')"

"Fake listening is when you're looking around the room or watching tv while someone is talking to you."

Listening to these comments I scanned my own experiences with the kids, thinking about times that I myself have been a fake listener. Honestly, there are too many to mention and I am the school counselor! It's not realistic to be a perfect listener all the time, but this was a great reminder that children are really paying attention to when we're not.

This brings me to my topic for the month – communication. In many ways, communication is at an all time high in our world. We can be in constant contact with each other through phone, texts, emails, and social media sites like Facebook. World news travels so quickly that we know about far away events almost immediately. Any thought or feeling that crosses our mind can be imparted through our social media pages within seconds.

The impact has been strange. Because of the Internet I feel like I, along with the world, has some increased personal empathy. We are able to learn about people and communities that we might not have had access to in the past. We can read people's words; hear their voices and perspective. At the same time, I wonder if our world is smaller because we are taking in the information in a 2 dimensional way. Other than comments sections, which are usually quite dysfunctional, how do we process what we have learned with real people? Not just the people around us, but also with people who might disagree with us? How do we hold empathy in those situations?

Learning to communicate what is inside

We all need to be able to decipher and communicate the feelings we are having inside both to others and ourselves. While working with a child of any age, I find 'I don't know' to be a common response when I ask them how they are feeling. This is an opportunity to dig deeper and work on skills that connect thoughts, emotions and language. Did you know that every feeling has a corresponding physical sensation? This is factual and a good place to start. Ask them, where do you feel this emotion in your body? Give them a variety of words to talk about feelings so they can describe the nuances of anger, happiness, sadness or worry. We are not born with the natural ability to figure out and talk about emotions, but if you keep practicing the skills of noticing and saying what is happening inside, I promise your child will get good at this. I don't make very many promises as a therapist, but I have seen this happen enough that I believe it to be true.

The movie 'Inside Out' has been so great for helping kids understand and express feelings. I have had success using this as a jumping off point for this skill. I am also a huge fan of Dr. Becky Bailey who developed the 'Conscious Discipline' model. She has made many helpful videos about coaching children of all ages through their feelings. Here is a link to some of her YouTube videos:

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Becky+Baily

What I love so much about Dr. Bailey is that she also focuses on helping parents manage their emotions so that they can step back and become better teachers of emotional skill.

Just listen

Earlier I mentioned how tuned in children are to the fact that adults are not always paying attention. I have compassion around this because I know how many directions a person can be pulled even in just one day. However, the more we listen to children – truly listen – and create space for them to share, the better communicators they will become. Going into their world is going to increase your empathy for them as well.

If you're not already doing this, the next time you have a conversation with your child, practice being present and NOT problem solving. This is tough because of course you want your children to be safe and having already been through this period of life, you know the answers! But letting your child just talk is invaluable. Sometimes it is all someone needs to feel better, to just let it out, and sometimes hearing their own words out loud can help them come to a solution themselves. To encourage your child to keep the communication going, try using some prompts like:

- Tell me more about that?
- Wow!
- I can tell you're really feeling _____ (name a feeling)
- It's okay to let it out
- I'm here for you

You will want to regularly check in – even if your child is not up to talking at one point (or many points). Leaving that door always open is meaningful, even if it seems like your child doesn't really notice. *"Whenever you're ready, I will be here,"* is a good way to let them know you are available. It is also a great idea to circle back around to previous discussions. *"How did things work out with your friend?"* This makes the point that you are listening and interested in an on-going discussion.

Timing is everything

You have probably noticed that there are certain times your child will open up more than others. Parents have told me that teenagers become more willing to talk in the car. Other kids might prefer dinnertime, bedtime or Saturday mornings. Whenever it is, pay attention and seize the opportunity to open the space for communication. It is really up to you to be the initiator as you are teaching your children these skills. Trust that they are paying attention and will eventually develop that habit of coming to you as a reflex.

Offer encouragement and praise

People really enjoy positive feedback and your children are no different. Sometimes it's easy to get lost in parenting; I know at least as a counselor I am occasionally itching to deliver a message related to their bigger picture (ie, school or behavioral responsibilities). This gets in the way of my ability to really hear and I can see that it shuts them down. I have noticed that a child will tell me a little bit and as I use encouragement, they will open up and tell me more. Make a point to look for honestly positive aspects of what your child is bringing to you and highlight them. Even if you don't like what your child is saying, you can let them know how great it was that they came to you. That kind of unconditional positive regard will make you a safe person to approach.

Hard conversations are hard

There is no getting around it: hard conversations are just hard. If you are already working on developing open communication with your child, you will be more practiced and prepared when they come around. It may be tempting to skip them or not share the whole truth, but developmentally appropriate honesty is crucial to helping kids truly understand the world. Using all of the emotional communication skills, active listening, timing and encouragement that you are practicing every day will help make the tougher conversations more effective, clear and honest.

One of the driving forces behind my initiative to have group conversations with classrooms every month is to practice all of the skills necessary to become comfortable communicators. It is my hope that as the year progresses we will be able to have the face to face conversations necessary for getting through relational and ideological disagreements with empathy and grace. When parents are working on this at home, the chances of success increase exponentially. It is hard work, but I believe the impact of this will go far beyond your family, this community and the school district, and in fact benefit the entire world.