Teaching Empathy:

A Blueprint for Caring, Compassion, and Community

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Study Guide

Teaching Empathy: A Blueprint for Caring, Compassion, and Community is a social skills, bullying prevention, and character education resource that reflects over 20 years of experience by author David A. Levine as a classroom teacher and workshop facilitator. It incorporates the three intentions of teaching empathy that Levine holds when working with schools:

1. To make schools emotionally safe
2. To teach social skills
3. To create a culture of caring

This study guide will help you infuse the ideas, suggestions, and lessons from *Teaching Empathy* into your teaching philosophies, instructional practices, and classroom culture-building approaches.

Introduction

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1.   David A. Levine suggests that the emotions of our students can be harnessed in positive ways as we guide them toward making the pro-social choices of empathy, compassion, caring, and generosity. While these choices may seem so natural and basic, the social culture of many schools does not promote such pro-social choices.

What are some ways your school promotes pro-social decision making?

2.   In the story of Robert Fulghum and the little girl (page 2), his intuitive response models what all young people need in our schools: a caring, thoughtful, creative, and responsive adult who is supportive during times of uncertainty and stress. When such a person is present in the life of a student, that student will feel the emotional safety and trust necessary to thrive in school while learning the life skills to succeed in the future.

The goal of the "empathy teacher" is to teach the necessary social and life skills in ways that engage students by meeting their needs, speaking to their hearts, and naming the reality of the social challenges they face each day. The purpose of this book is to help create new habits of caring and empathy for the students through the creation of an emotionally safe learning community.

What is your greatest hope for your students as you begin to read this book?

Section 1
Teaching Empathically:
When Teachers Make Connections

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3. This section emphasizes how critical it is to cultivate caring, compassionate, and empathic relationships with your students as a primary approach for teaching empathy and its companion social competencies. Reflect on the following question to help identify your caring intentions for your students:

    What do your students need to succeed?

    Your answers to this question will help you articulate your beliefs about emotional safety and how you can meet the developmental needs of your students. In the story of Bob and Mrs. Arns at the beginning of Section 1 (pages 6 and 7), Mrs. Arns found a way to engage Bob in the opportunities for success and achievement that the school experience could provide. The handwriting contest (a customized achievement exercise) was the door she created and opened, inviting Bob into the world of achievement, success, and connection.

    As you consider the story of how Mrs. Arns met Bob's needs by engaging him with the handwriting contest, think of one challenging student with whom you are currently working.

    What empathic strategy would help you meet his or her developmental needs more effectively?

4. Reflect further on how connected your students feel to school and the people there. Then consider these questions from *Teaching Empathy* (page 10):

    Do your students enjoy being at school?

Do they feel that students are nice to each other?

Do they feel that their teachers like them?

Are their emotions impacted memorably in healthy and positive ways?

Are their relations with others healthy and positive?

You can also use this set of questions for a group dialogue among your teaching colleagues as a way to realize the kind of power a unified school staff can have with its students. When you work together, you can create a setting in which relationships are key, individuality is honored and encouraged, and the cultural norm is to work toward understanding others.

Each of these practices takes desire, skill, knowledge, and time. Over time, the investment in creating such an environment will pay huge dividends in the overall positive tone felt, the empathic practices observed, and the student achievement and success demonstrated socially, emotionally, and academically.

Section 2
Learning Empathy:
Facilitating Social Discovery

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5. This section describes the hopeful and optimistic ways in which you can effectively teach social skills for a life-changing and emotionally memorable impact. The great challenge in teaching social skills effectively is to find a pathway of relevance and meaning for your students. If your learning sessions are "canned," contrived, or preachy, you will lose the opportunity for meaning and

behavior change. If your sessions are based on real life, are engaging and interesting, they will tap into the cutting edge of the social experiences that are part of each student's day. A cutting edge lesson takes the students to what is sometimes called their *learning edge.* Students on their learning edge are highly curious, motivated, and connected because they are opened up to new ways of understanding their world of social interactions and decision making.

Consider the following questions:

What are the most important social competencies your students need to learn?

What are the components of a successful social skills lesson?

How can you assess the effectiveness of your lessons?

6.   Feedback is a critical teaching practice for developing social skills (see pages 69 and 70). Feedback is an art form because it takes great skill and focus to effectively shape another person's social choices and accompanying behaviors. Feedback is observational; it identifies what was seen and what was heard. It also expresses how the person giving the feedback feels based on what happened. Essentially, feedback is given to help an individual or a group reflect, learn, and grow. It is not an act of criticism or shaming. It should be hopeful and supportive, serving as the bond for strengthened relationships.

Reflect for a moment on effective feedback and consider these questions:

How do you like to receive feedback? Do you like to receive it alone or in front of others?

When do you like to receive feedback? Right away or after a little time has passed?

Do you like to respond immediately or do you need time to reflect before you respond?

How do you feel when someone gives you feedback?

Your answers to these critical questions can help you create an empathic road map for how you will deliver effective and nurturing feedback to your students.

7.   When you build a cultural norm of learning through caring and support with your students, you move toward the reflective practice of exploring emotional intelligence (EI) (pages 61 and 62). Emotional intelligence is the gateway to understanding what a person truly needs in order to thrive in the future. Daniel Goleman (1988) writes that "emotional intelligence refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 317). Read the section on emotional intelligence on pages 61 to 69, and then reflect on the following questions:

What are your strengths as they relate to emotional intelligence?

What are your vulnerabilities as they relate to emotional intelligence?

How can you optimize your strengths and minimize your vulnerabilities?

Who will you ask to help you in this endeavor?

8.   After reading about emotional intelligence, consider how you can strengthen your own EI competencies when you are in one of the many stressful situations educators can experience today:

Describe a stressful situation you often find yourself in either professionally or personally. Given your new-found awareness about emotional intelligence, how might you handle this situation differently in the future?

For more information on emotional intelligence, see www.6seconds.org.

Section 3

Living Empathy:

The School of Belonging

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9.   This section provides a blueprint for creating a caring and empathic school culture. Review the 10 intentions of the School of Belonging on pages 97 to 99, and consider the following question:

How many of these intentions are practiced in your school?

Optional Activities

You can use the 10 Intentions worksheet on page 11 of this study guide in a number of ways to explore how you and your school are doing on becoming a School of Belonging:

- Individual educators can use the worksheet to answer the question posed above. Use the space below each intention to record how you or your school could implement or improve your efforts.

- School leaders can use the worksheet to determine how many intentions you or your colleagues have cultivated beyond conversation and into action. Use the space below each intention to describe how you can nurture this process of self-reflection for the faculty of your school.

- Schools can use the worksheet as an anonymous survey for everyone on staff so that the school leader and staff can gather information on the school's culture and on staff-generated strategies for becoming a School of Belonging.

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10.   The section "A Tale of Two Meetings" (pages 94 and 95) demonstrates several distinct cultural norms through the two descriptions. With these norms in mind, consider the following questions:

Which meeting would most likely take place in your school?

How productive are your meetings at school?

Does your school work from a deficit model of what is wrong or an asset-based way of thinking which states, "We're doing great. How can we be even greater?"

What are your reasons for answering this way?

Section 4
Courageous Conversations

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11.   The structured lessons and processes in this section's empathy-building curriculum will help you apply the first three sections of the resource. The *Teaching Empathy* CD has seven songs and two recitations that give you a unique approach for *speaking to the heart* of each student. Empathy by its nature is a "heart skill" because it includes the many facets of caring, compassion, and generosity—or skills from the heart. Listen to the song "Howard Gray" (track 2 from the CD). After listening, reflect on the following questions:

What thoughts or feelings did you have as you listened?

What memories does the song bring up for you?

What students did the song bring to mind?

12.   Read the scripted lessons for your grade level (either grades 3–4 beginning on page 121 or grades 5 and higher beginning on page 145).

    How might you integrate these lessons into your curriculum or school-wide character education or bullying prevention program?

    As you prepare to teach these lessons, open yourself up to a new paradigm, to what noted thought leader Stephen Covey defines as a new "perception, assumption, theory, frame of reference or lens through which you view the world" (2004, p. 19).

    Instead of viewing yourself as a teacher of social decision making, see yourself more as a facilitator of social discovery who guides discovery through conversation rather than lecturing about it through a formalized lesson.

    A key facilitative strategy for these lessons is dialogue (pages 117 and 118), an activity in which a group collectively explores an issue. These lessons are designed to help you and your students collectively explore challenging social dilemmas that young people face every day. The music and recitations will help the group focus on the skill and issue in a novel, entertaining, and thought-provoking manner.

    As you consider the best ways to use these lessons and their accompanying processes, how might you integrate several or all of them into your classroom?

Final Thoughts

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You may wish to create a reading group to dialogue about the ideas in *Teaching Empathy*. You might also want to work with other teachers to try the different teaching approaches described in this resource. You could then consider these approaches as a group: One teacher could lead his or her class in the activity, and the other teachers could observe, provide feedback, and work toward using the process with their own classes or groups. The following order of teaching approaches may be most effective:

- The Listening Wheel (page 64)
- The Class Meeting (pages 80 to 84)
- The Fishbowl (pages 84 to 89)

The key to bringing the benefits of empathy into your classroom is to promise yourself that you will apply at least one idea, reflection, process, or lesson into the way you set up your classroom and how you teach. Although this resource includes dynamic lessons that you can integrate into your curriculum, the primary purpose of the *Teaching Empathy* book and CD is to help you integrate empathy-building strategies and processes into the way you interact with your students and your colleagues. Empathy and its companion social skills are not only life skills but also ways of being which invite healthy, safe, and joyful relationships with all of the people in your life: your students, colleagues, friends, and family members.

Comments and Feedback

We are always open to any thoughts, feelings, or ideas you may wish to share about the *Teaching Empathy* resource book and CD. To tell us what you think, contact the author in care of Solution Tree, Publications, pubs@solution-tree.com, 1–800–733–6786, 304 West Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47404.

References

Covey, S. (2004). *The 8th habit: From effectiveness to greatness*. New York: Free Press.

Goleman, D. (1988). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

The 10 Intentions of a School of Belonging

The following 10 intentions that create a School of Belonging are felt through specific practices, programs, and activities (pages 97 to 99). Use a checkmark to the left to indicate the intentions already present in your school. Use the space below each intention to note examples of the intention from your professional life or to note how your school could bring the intention into the school community.

__ 1. The presence of a supportive leader.

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__ 2. Effective social and emotional in-service training.

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__ 3. An inviting school office.

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__ 4. Assembly programs or student workshops.

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__ 5. Mentor programs for staff and students.

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__ 6. Monthly grade-level community meetings.

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__ 7. Daily celebration and recognition of students.

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__ 8. A variety of extracurricular activities for all students.

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__ 9. Alternative programming.

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__ 10. Parent workshops.

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