Embrace empathy

When Claire notices a classmate on crutches struggling with his books, she senses his frustration and offers to help. She has empathy—she can understand and share others' feelings. Build empathy in your child with these ideas.

Read feelings
Learning to identify other people's emotions is the first step toward feeling empathetic. Take turns acting out a feeling for family members to guess. For example, open your eyes and mouth wide to show fear. Or slump your shoulders and look down to display sadness. Variation: Draw faces on paper plates, and guess the emotions.

Create an “empathy identity”
Notice ways your youngster shows that she cares how people feel. You might say, “I can tell you feel bad that your brother is sick. It was nice of you to bring him a blanket.” You could also point out others showing empathy, too—in real life and in books and movies.

Respond appropriately
When someone is having a hard time (say, a friend's parents are getting divorced), your child may not know what to say. The good news? Sometimes people just want another person to listen and express empathy. Brainstorm honest responses like “I’m not sure what to say, but I’m glad you told me,” or “I’m sorry this is happening. I’m here if you want to talk.”

Let’s collaborate!
Knowing how to collaborate with classmates will help your youngster work well and learn in a group. Try these tips to practice collaboration skills at home.

Balance speaking and listening. During family discussions, give each person a chance to talk. Your child should listen carefully so he can acknowledge what everyone says and build on their ideas. (“I liked what you said about ____. I think ____.”)

Encourage compromise. If your youngster has a disagreement with a sibling or friend, such as whether to play indoors or outdoors, think of it as a learning opportunity. Ask them to think of a way they could both feel satisfied, perhaps by doing a jigsaw puzzle outside at a picnic table. Or they might flip a coin to decide which to do first.
Mix-it-up study methods

Fresh techniques will breathe new life into your child’s study sessions. Share these ways to add variety and help him stay motivated.

Create a mural

Suggest that your child hang a big sheet of paper on a wall. On it, he can write and illustrate facts, concepts, and procedures he’s studying. Say his math test includes rounding numbers, he might write the rule (“If a number ends in 5–9, round up”) in big orange letters across the bottom and add examples “electric circuit,” clues might include “path,” “current,” and “conductor.” He can shuffle the cards and stack them clue sides up. Players take turns drawing a card, reading the clues, and saying what’s on the other side. Keep the card if you’re right—the person with the most cards wins.

Play with clue cards

Encourage your youngster to make and play a card game with a study partner. He could write each concept on a separate index card and list three clues on the back. For

Boost independence

Coaxing my daughter, Grace, through her routine on school mornings was no easy task. I decided that she needed to become more independent—and that our mornings could be more pleasant. So I’ve started having her get ready by herself. I let Grace pick out an alarm clock and showed her how to set it. Then, on her closet door, we posted a list of her morning tasks, including getting dressed, brushing her teeth, and fixing her hair.

Now when we’re both ready, we meet downstairs for breakfast before we head out the door. Our mornings are much easier, and I think Grace is proud of her newfound independence.

Write a picture book

Your youngster can use her imagination to retell a familiar story, then preserve her version in a homemade book! She’ll practice experimenting with characters, setting, and plot as she writes.

First, let your child pick a story and think of ways she could put her own twist on it. She might write a plot based on Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Roald Dahl) but use herself and her friends for the main characters. Or maybe she’ll pick a story set in another country, such as Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans, and have it take place in the United States.

Next, have your youngster write each sentence or paragraph of her story on a separate sheet of paper and illustrate it. Finally, invite her to read her book aloud to your family.

Q & A

Q: My fourth-grader says some of his friends are getting cell phones, and now he wants one. Are cell phones appropriate at this age?

A: Most kids this age don’t really need a cell phone, since they’re supervised by adults who carry phones. And owning a phone, especially one with internet access, is a big responsibility. To decide when to give your son a phone, first think about your family’s budget. Also, consider how well he follows safety rules and takes care of his belongings. Those are good indicators of how he will behave with a phone.

If you feel he’s ready, you might start with a lower-cost one with limited features. Then, create guidelines. Perhaps he may use his phone only to call or text family members and close friends. Discuss consequences for breaking or losing it. And set times when his phone is off-limits, such as during family meals, in the hour before bedtime, and after lights-out.