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Encouraging Empathy in Children

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"As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression." Mr. Rogers

Empathy is the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. Studies show that around two years of age, children start to show genuine empathy, understanding how other people feel even when they don't feel the same way themselves. And not only do they feel another person's pain, but they actually try to soothe it.

When we encourage empathy in our children, we help them create more opportunities for success in school and other aspects of their lives. Many children's authors have focused on empathy in their books.

In his 1954 tale *Horton Hears a Who!*, Dr. Seuss teaches us that no matter who they are or where they're from, people are people and are deserving of respect, understanding, and empathy by writing "A person's a person, no matter how small". Seuss was also quick to remind us in *The Lorax* that "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

Well-loved author Mo Willems uses vocabulary that is perfect for beginning readers (and vetted by an early-learning specialist). In the award-winning *Elephant & Piggie* series, (about the many intricacies of friendship), Gerald and Piggie laugh with each other, want to share everything together, and, of course, occasionally grow exasperated with each other. Young readers can especially learn the importance of empathy in *A Big Guy Took My Ball!*, where Piggie learns that a "big guy" owns the ball and was just trying to play with her, offering a lesson in seeing a

situation from someone else's perspective. *Should I Share My Ice Cream?* presents a funny story about the dilemma of doing the right thing.

Additionally, parents may want to check out *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed In Our All-About-Me World* by bestselling author Michele Borba. This book offers a 9-step program to help parents cultivate empathy in children, from birth to young adulthood, and explains why developing a healthy sense of empathy is a key predictor of which kids will thrive and succeed in the future.

As with many life skills, the best way for parents to teach empathy is to model it in their daily life. NOLS has a Parenting Collection with materials specifically chosen to support and help enrich families through thought-provoking and interesting parenting research and tips. This and other collections at your library can help you find several options for addressing a variety of parenting concerns.

Find these and many more titles to enhance your family's empathy conversation at your local NOLS library and join us in celebrating our 2019 Summer Reading Program. All ages are welcome to join in the fun. Sign up today for an opportunity to win fabulous prizes! To search for titles, find information on the Summer Reading Program, and much more, visit www.nols.org.