



Building Perspective-Taking Skills in Young Children

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What Are Perspective-Taking Skills?

Perspective-taking is the skill of understanding and considering the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and viewpoints of others¹. It plays a critical role in

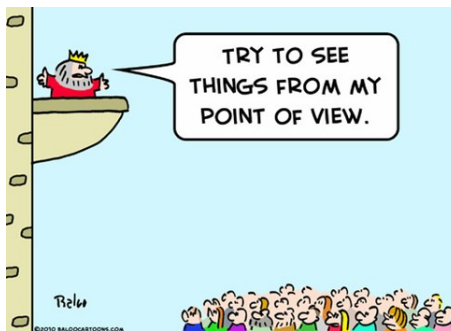
empathy and effective social interaction².

Research shows that even a 3-year-old child can grasp another person's perspective, even without being explicitly guided³.

Stages of Perspective-Taking

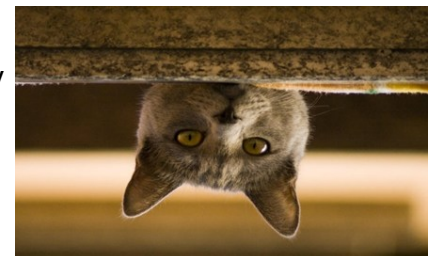
Robert L. Selman studied how kids learn to understand other people's points of view as they grow and think more deeply. His work explains the different stages children go through as they develop socially and mentally⁴. The ages for these following stages can overlap because kids don't all learn perspective-taking at the same speed.

- Stage 1: Undifferentiated perspective-taking (ages 3-6). Children know that people can have different thoughts and feelings, but they often mix up their own thoughts with others'. They might think that everyone feels



the same way they do.

- Stage 2: Social-informational perspective-taking (ages 5-9). Children begin to understand that people may see things differently because they have different information. However, even though they realize perspectives can vary, they often still think their own perspective is the most correct. They may believe that the only reason for different viewpoints is having different information.
- Stage 3: Self-reflective perspective-taking (ages 7-12). Children can now imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes. They can think about their own thoughts and actions from another person's point of view and realize that others can do the same.
- Stage 4: Third-party perspective-taking (ages 10-15). Children and teens can see how a situation might look to a third person who isn't directly involved. They can think about how an outsider might see the



thoughts and actions of both themselves and someone else.

- Stage 5: Societal perspective-taking (ages 14-adult). Teens and adults start to understand that people's perspectives can be shaped by the rules, beliefs and values of society. They realize that these larger ideas can influence how people see things.

Why Is Perspective-Taking Important?

Perspective-taking is important for young children because it helps them understand what others are thinking and feeling. When children learn to see things from another person's point of view, they get better at making friends, solving problems and getting along with others. It also helps them develop empathy, meaning they start caring more about how others feel⁵. By practicing perspective-taking, kids can communicate better with others, collaborate during play and resolve conflicts fairly. Starting perspective-taking early helps children develop the skills they need to navigate social situations throughout their lives.



How Parents/Caregivers Support Perspective-Taking Skills

Even at a young age, children can start to consider another person's perspective, though both children and adults often find it challenging to understand others' viewpoints⁶. Some studies have shown that children are capable of considering others' perspectives⁷ and that parents/caregivers play a big role in helping young children develop these skills. Additionally,

research has found that perspective-taking training for preschoolers can enhance their ability to understand others' perspective and promote prosocial behavior⁸.

Model Empathy

Show empathy in your daily life by thinking about how others might feel and talk about it with your child. When parents/caregivers show empathy in everyday life, it teaches children how to recognize emotions in others and respond with kindness and compassion.

Talk About Feelings

Frequently talk about your feelings and your child's feelings. Use real-life situations such as losing a toy, welcoming a new baby, or having a disagreement with a sibling or parent, to explore how people might be feeling. This helps children become more aware of their own emotions and teaches them how to recognize and understand others' emotions.



Ask Open-Ended, Perspective-Taking Questions

Encourage your child to consider how others might feel or react in various situations by asking open-ended questions. These questions help children think critically about different perspectives and reflect on how their actions affect others. For example: "When you didn't share your toy, how do you think your friend felt? What do you think they might be thinking?" or "You saw a child crying today. Why do you think he/she was upset? How do you think that made him/her feel?"

Read Stories

Read stories with your child and talk about how the characters feel, why they make certain choices and what might happen next. Stories often show characters who face challenges, experience various emotions, and make decisions based on their feelings and situations. By discussing these characters, you help your child understand how others think and feel. You can choose children's books that focus on perspective-taking or simply read any book and explore the different perspectives of the characters together.



Encourage Sharing and Turn-Taking

Encourage activities where your child needs to share, take turns and cooperate with others. These activities help them learn to work together and consider the needs and feelings of those around them. You can create role-playing scenarios to practice these skills, such as pretending to be at a restaurant where they share food or wait their turn to order.

Help With Conflict Resolution

When conflicts occur between your child and others, help them consider the other person's feelings and work together to find a solution. Use these moments as critical learning opportunities to teach your child how to manage their emotions and understand different perspectives.

Praise Perspective-Taking Behavior

When your child shows understanding of someone else's feelings or considers another person's point of view, praise the effort. Acknowledging their effort reinforces these positive behaviors and motivates them to keep developing empathy and social awareness. In everyday situations, you can reinforce positive behaviors by offering specific praise, such as, "I

noticed you shared your favorite toy with your friend, Audrey. That was very kind of you." You can also discuss feelings during these moments by asking, "How do you think Addie feels now that you shared with her?" or "How did it feel when Michael waited for his turn?"

Role-Play

Encourage your child to participate in pretend play where they can take on different roles, such as playing house, pretending to be a doctor or acting out scenarios with toys. Through pretend play, children step into others' shoes, allowing them to explore different perspectives and better understand emotions, situations and responses from various perspectives.

Conclusion

Helping young children develop perspective-taking skills is crucial for fostering empathy, improving social interactions and building emotional intelligence. Parents and caregivers can support this by modeling empathy, talking about feelings and asking questions that make kids think about how others feel. Activities such as sharing, pretend play and reading stories also teach children to view situations from different perspectives. As children practice these skills, they become better at solving problems, making friends and understanding the world around them. Developing these skills early will benefit them throughout their lives.

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