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# 21st-century skill that's in-demand: empathy

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*Based on original blog post by Chelsey Philpot*

Until recently, most people thought that empathy was something you were born with. However, research gathered by scientists and doctors over the past few decades shows growing evidence that empathy *can* and *should* be taught. It's an in-demand skill that can help students flourish in their studies, careers, and lives.

Researchers and authors have also recently made arguments for why empathy isn't always a good thing. It can lead to racism, tribalism, and other us-versus-them societal evils that are, in many ways, the opposite of empathy. While we may be able to teach empathy, that doesn't mean doing so is without complications.

## What we mean by "empathy"

"Won't you be my neighbor?" Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers, was a model of empathy—he had a keen ability to sense other people's emotions and could imagine what they might be thinking or feeling. He taught children (and adults) the importance of seeing the world from someone else's perspective.

With modern research we now know that empathy goes beyond identifying and understanding the feelings of another person. Empathy also includes the ability to use our imaginations to viscerally experience what another person is experiencing.

In her book, *The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences*, Dr. Helen Riess, a psychiatrist at

Massachusetts General Hospital, explains that empathy is not just a personality trait. "Increasing evidence suggests that empathy is partially hardwired into the brain and splits into three different aspects," she writes, "emotional (or affective empathy), cognitive (or thinking empathy), and motivation for an empathic response."

Through neuroimaging studies of the brain, scientists have been able to see empathy in action.

Imagine that you cut your hand on a piece of glass while lying in an fMRI machine. The image captured by the fMRI machine would show pain centers in your brain lighting up. Now imagine that you and a friend are lying in fMRI machines side-by-side and you see her cut her hand; the pain center in her brain *and* the one in your brain light up. She's feeling pain and you're imagining—or empathizing with—her pain. Your neurons are mirroring hers.

### **Teaching & learning empathy**

Thanks to numerous studies that focus on empathy, there's a plethora of data to support that empathy can be taught. In a January 2016 article in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, "The efficacy of empathy training: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials," researchers Emily Teding van Berkhout and John M. Malouff analyzed 18 training programs involving over 1,000 participants. They found that formal empathy training programs were overall effective.

One approach to teaching empathy to students is to help them practice it, such as through case studies and book discussions where students ask themselves "What would I do in this situation?" These exercises can show students how to act on empathy, solve conflicts, and deal with emotions. Educators can also help students by identifying barriers to empathy, such as stereotypes or stress, and give them strategies to overcome them.

### **Challenges of empathy**

In his book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, author Paul Bloom argues that empathy can be myopic, causing human beings to focus on the singular and specific rather than the greatest amount of good. "[Empathy] can sway us toward the one over the many. This perverse moral mathematics is part of the reason why governments and individuals care more about the little girl stuck in a well than about events that will affect millions or billions."

Empathy is further complicated by the fact that we're much more likely to empathize with people who look, act, and live like us. "... emotional empathy can be weak or absent when someone is from a different neighborhood or a different ethnicity or race," Dr. Riess writes. "This explains why empathy is not a direct line to morality and can at times be a source of immoral action."

The above empathy challenges aren't without solutions. Dr. Riess believes that human beings can learn to expand their empathy beyond "in-groups and borders."

"...empathy informs a vital intergenerational, interracial, and international perspective that must be valued, vaulted, and cultivated on a grand scale," Dr. Riess writes in *The Empathy Effect*. "Without expanding empathy beyond our in-groups and borders, civilization as we know it will not survive. Empathy training is the key transformative education."