

How do you teach your Child Empathy?

In the first place, why would you want your child to develop empathy? Surely they'll do better in life if they have a hard-nosed aggressive, me-first attitude? Wrong, according to Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, the groundbreaking book that's still making waves 15 years after its publication. Empathy is a crucial part of Emotional Intelligence, or EI, and people who are highly emotionally intelligent tend to do better in life than those who don't. In fact emotional intelligence is a better predictor of success than scoring highly on IQ tests. Part of the reason is that most jobs require interaction with people and we prefer to be with people who understand and respect feelings.

Can empathy be taught? Not as such, but awareness can be raised. Some people have less natural empathy than others. It's a bit like music, we won't all learn to play Mozart but we may come to appreciate listening to the sound. One of the best ways of raising awareness of empathy is through telling children stories. Stories tend to engage different parts of the brain than we normally use, bypassing our rational minds and allowing us to engage directly at the emotional level. And stories often bridge the hot-cold gap in empathy, identified by Gwen Dewar ('Teaching empathy: Evidence-based tips for fostering empathy in children'). Dewar points out that it's hard to imagine what a hungry person is feeling if you've just eaten a large meal. But stories can, because the magic to the storyteller is to create a space where we can imagine the feelings of other people.

There are so many stories but a new book, that has just been published called the Legends of Altai, by Paolo Tiberi, has stories that will captivate the imagination of children and adults alike. The first story in the collection, 'King Argoz and the Thief', starts out with a rich King enjoying a sumptuous life, surrounded by the best things the material world has to offer, without any understanding of the realities of life beyond the palace walls. The crops fail and there is hunger in the land, but Argoz has no conception what it means to them. He is simply amazed that people don't love him any more. It's always a sign of lack of empathy when we relate everything to ourselves. He sets out in the disguise of a beggar to find out why.

His journey leads him to witness a man stealing some food. Without making an instant judgement as to right and wrong, the beggar king follows the thief. How could you explain that to a child? Is stealing wrong? Yes, I would argue that it is but sometimes there are circumstances where you have to steal in order to stay alive. Is the person who steals food or the person (or corporation) who withholds food in order to make more profit the bigger criminal? These are questions which we all have to face in the world at the moment.

King Argoz follows the thief to his simple dwelling and discovers the reason behind the theft. A sick child. The father, because we now come to recognize the thief as a father, and so understand his reason for stealing, had been intending to sell the stolen food in

order to buy medicines for his child. In that instant Argoz's world breaks open and the defences of wealth become as nothing. He feels the real tragedy of the situation, as Tiberi makes us feel the pain of the father who witnesses his child's suffering.

There is an important message here – by understanding and feeling another person's pain, you often get in touch with your own. We don't know what Argoz's life was like before this incident. We know that he was very protected from reality, or the reality that most people have to endure. This protection made him self-centred and lacking in empathy. The experience of the story opened him to new levels of feeling and changed the course of his life.

In a way, we protect ourselves from uncomfortable realities. We can explain this to another, or to a child, as not wanting to be feeling vulnerable, not wanting to feel as though there's nothing we can do to help. In the face of the World's suffering, two billion people without access to clean water, let alone adequate health care, who could not feel impotent? Tiberi makes his hero a king. A king, of course has immense power to change things. One of the questions that you can ask yourself is where do I have the power to change things. It doesn't matter if it's only in small ways.

Teach your children empathy. Teach them that every action makes a difference. Show them that the world can be a better place than it is now. Tell them that they will be more successful in life if they can understand the feelings of others. Read to them.

Chronicles of King Argoz, Prince Ultan and Princess Maya is the first of a series of riveting books in the Legends of Altai series by renowned self-awareness expert, Paolo F. Tiberi. If you would like to get a FREE chapter showcasing the book narrative style and story telling, please visit:

http://www.legendsofaltai.com/pages/free_gifts.php