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- Roadrunner Food Bank and Harvest Ministries
- All our wonderful presenters and agencies and businesses they represent

Wings for LIFE Programs

WHY TEACHING EMPATHY IS SO IMPORTANT IN TODAY’S SOCIETY

by Shelly Currier



Why is empathy important? It is because empathy leads us into action. It is through empathy that we can understand another person’s thoughts and feelings as though living the experience through their perspective. We do this both cognitively, by *identifying* another person’s thoughts and feelings, and emotionally, by having a *instinctual response* to someone's thoughts and feelings. The idea of “walking in someone else’s shoes” is made possible because of empathy.

According to a study by the University of Michigan Institute of Social Research, college students don’t have as much empathy as they use to. Sara Konrath, a researcher in this University of Michigan study, conducted a meta-analysis, combining the results of 72 different studies of American college students conducted between 1979 and 2009. This was based on standard tests of this personality trait. Konrath states, “College kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago [and] we found the biggest drop in empathy after the year 2000.”

We see this on the news, when guest lectures at college campuses must be cancelled for the speaker’s own safety. Shouting down, vulgarity, and even riots are started by students with opposing views. We now find those holding prominent positions in our society supporting and validating such behaviors—inciting violence against those who don’t think the way they do.

Instead of being open to listen to another perspective, we’ve defaulted to *confirmation bias*, the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s pre-existing beliefs. This is linked back to lack of empathy. A good example is the news we consume. We tend to watch those news stations and read publications that support beliefs we already hold to be true, dismissing any information that is contrary to such beliefs. This becomes a problem when we prevent others from expressing their opinions or beliefs. This is antithetical and destructive to a society built on freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and it keeps us from experiencing empathy for others. (See Page 2)

“College kids today are about 40% lower in Empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago.”
“We found the biggest drop in empathy after the year 2000.”



What is responsible for today’s decline in empathy? Konrath claims an increased exposure to media could be one factor. Taking out iPhones to record an accident rather than render assistance is a harsh reality of today’s culture. Studies affirm exposure to video games and violent media may play a role in the decrease in empathy. Young people are exposed to excessive violence on TV and in movies. Add to this the coverage of catastrophic events such as earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, tornados, school shootings, terrorist attacks at home and abroad, that are brought right into our homes via TV each day.

Margauz Masten on her blog “Feeling Good” cites the term *Compassion Fatigue* to explain the phenomena where people are constantly bombarded with tragic stories and eventually get emotionally worn out. Dave Cullen in his *New York Times* bestseller *Columbine* describes how one columnist said the victims’ families were “milking” the tragedy. And readers agreed with him! “All of us are sick and tired of the continued whining” a reader responded. This took place in 1999, before social media overtook our lives.

In light of the above, a steady decline in empathy may have many causal effects, one of which is heightened by social media. Cyber-bullying and hateful Facebook and Twitter comments berate individuals, flowing from those with no connection to the people they criticize—they neither know them personally nor are close enough to see the impact of their words. So how then does one go about restoring empathy in our young people?

Wings for L.I.F.E.’s Building Assets Program effectively tackles the topic of empathy each year. One such lesson on empathy has children create “shields”, one for girls (pictured here) and one for boys with a different description but same questions for both. Children list all the things that make them special and unique. Once completed the instructor invites a staff member to stand in front of the class with her shield. The staff member talks about her shield and why the things she listed are so important to her. The children are then asked to pretend the staff member is an eight-year old girl named Michelle who is excited about her first day at a new school. Sadly, she encounters various upsets—she misses the school bus, her mom must drive her to school, her backpack is left in the car, and she is very late to class. We want children to understand that the day doesn’t begin the minute a student sets foot in school, but it starts each morning at home. Sometimes unforeseen events happen. Each time we describe a setback that Michelle experiences, a piece of the staff member’s shield is torn off. This visually demonstrates how such incidents personally affect us. The most hurtful incident is when a classmate calls her stupid and the other children laugh. The story ends at recess with Michelle sitting all by herself watching the other children play and laugh. She is sure they are laughing at her. She never wants to go back.

Shield that Girls Complete

I AM LOVABLE AND CUTE

My favorite color is: My favorite subject is:

My best friends name:

My favorite food:

What I enjoy doing most when out of school:

My favorite game to play:

What makes me happiest:

What I like best about myself:

At the end of the story, the class reconstructs the events and what part they could have played in changing things. The children voice so many positive suggestions because they realize the entire outcome could have been different if just one child was friendly to Michelle and let her know she was welcomed there.

We had a third grade student in one of our classes who has selective mutism (extreme anxiety in new social situations) and rarely participated in class discussions. It surprised the instructor when this little girl came up to her several weeks later and told her that she saw a boy at recess sitting all by himself. She knew that he was a new student. No one was playing or speaking to him. He looked very sad. Her comment to our instructor was, “My heart went out to him, so I walked over and said ‘Would you like to be my friend?’” This is empathy. And what is most impressive is that this little girl overcame her own anxiety to reach out to this boy to make him feel welcomed.

Along with lessons such as this, we also teach caring, kindness, gratitude, service to others, resolving conflict peacefully, respect, cultural awareness and self-perception that complement empathy.

(Continued on bottom of P. 3)

Wings for L.I.F.E.

Why Try Leadership Middle School Program



WhyTry Leadership Program started at Mesa Middle School in 2014. Wings for L.I.F.E. is really excited that beginning in fall 2018, the program will be in two additional middle schools. It is our hope, if funding permits, to have the WhyTry Program in all four middle schools. This program also includes lessons on the importance of empathy .

This evidence-based program teaches social and emotional principles to youth in a way they can understand and remember. The WhyTry curriculum utilizes visual analogies that teach important life-skills (decisions have consequences, dealing with peer pressure, obeying laws and rules, plugging into support systems). The visual analogies are reinforced through creative use of customized hip-hop music, video, and learning activities including journal activities that help students reflect on program concepts and engages all major learning styles (visual, auditory, and body-kinesthetic). WhyTry is based on sound empirical principles, including solution-focused brief therapy, social and emotional intelligence, and multisensory learning. The program's concept is to teach social and emotional principles to youth in a way they can understand and remember.

Studies show that understanding and retention of a new concept increase dramatically with addition of experiential teaching elements including demonstration, discussion (processing), practice by doing and teaching. Classes on leadership, teamwork, making good choices, peer pressure, coping skills for anger and conflict, empathy, bully prevention as well as substance abuse prevention are just some of the topics discussed.

Both WhyTry and WhyTry Resiliency lessons are taught by Wings for L.I.F.E. instructors trained in this methodology. For more information, please refer to <http://whytry.org>.

Many supporters of Wings for L.I.F.E. tell me that if you help just one child, you have made a difference. Our surveys to parents and to the children in our program have demonstrated that not just one but many children have been helped.

I want to thank our talented staff for creating a nurturing environment where children feel valued and are excited to learn and model the new behaviors they are taught. I thank Roswell Independent School District for allowing us to have our programs in their schools and all the support they have given us. I especially thank parents and caregivers for allowing us to work with these awesome children. They are indeed Roswell's finest!

It is through the donations from our supporters that we can continue to offer this program free of charge.



What we instill in our children will be the foundation upon which they build their future.
S. Maraboli

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Inside Story: Why Teaching Empathy is so Importance in Today's Society

*How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment
before starting to improve the world. — Anne Frank*

All Wings for L.I.F.E. Programs are Free to the Public

- ◇ **Community Outreach Program is set to resume January 2019. Thank you to all our supporting agencies and family and friends.**
- ◇ **Building Assets Social and Emotional Learning Skills is offered in all twelve elementary schools. There are fifteen weekly programs. Marty Garcia is the Program Coordinator.**
- ◇ **Why Try Leadership Program is offered on-site at Mesa, Sierra, and Mt. View Middle Schools starting in August 2018. Lauren Dillard and Chelsea Vasquez Co-Instructors.**
- ◇ **Community Parenting Program offered each Wednesday from 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm at Andy's Hall, St. Andrew's Church. Court approved with open admission. Sally Green, Instructor.**
- ◇ **Programs for men (Bobby Heard, Instructor) and women in adult detention and youth juvenile detention (Chelsea Vasquez, instructor)**

To learn more about Wings for L.I.F.E. programs, please contact Shelly at 575-317-2042