

# Empathy

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Empathy is a skill which all children need to develop. Many confuse it with the word *sympathy*, which is not exactly the same. Probably ‘putting oneself in someone else’s shoes’ or ‘the ability to enter into the experience of another’ is more appropriate. In the local educational scene the word *empathy* is often used in the context of history teaching and in the area of counselling.

Empathy is “the power to enter into the feeling and the spirit of others.” Webster’s Dictionary, 1989.

“...Empathy is an ability to imagine with some degree of accuracy what it's like to be in the predicament of the other person; ... empathy entails the ability to communicate that awareness so the other person feels understood.”

Blatner, Adam, *Using Role Playing In Teaching Empathy*, 2002.

Teachers should present pupils with practical examples so as to help them understand the behaviour and the feelings of other children in particular circumstances. Consider the following pictures and situations, starting with something simple involving everyday behaviour, and moving on to situations involving feelings.

## Picture 1

The teacher tells the pupils that the boy's name is George. George is posting an invitation to his cousin.

“Put yourself in George's place.

What sort of invitation are you sending to your cousin? Do you think s/he will accept the invitation?”



Picture 1

Teachers should observe that

- (a) the use of role playing (an important skill in itself) is crucial
- (b) at this initial stage the child is not being asked anything concerning feelings
- (c) rather than developing the skill of empathy, this task helps to develop the skills of imagination and spontaneity. But we have to keep in mind that having a fertile imagination and the capability to be spontaneous is a step towards developing the skill of empathising.

## Picture 2

“Anna went to the dentist. Put yourself in Anna's place. How are you feeling in the dentist's chair? The dentist is checking your mouth. It could

be that you need a filling. How do you feel about that? At last the dentist says, ‘Your gums and teeth are healthy’.

How do you feel now? Perhaps relieved that you do not need any filling?”



Picture 2

### Picture 3

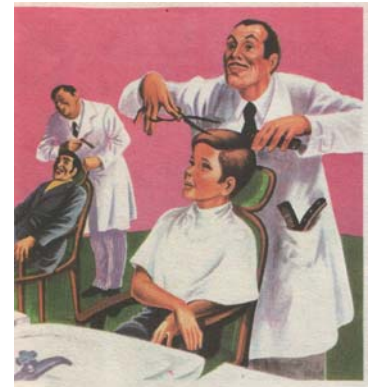
“Jason went to have a haircut, but something terrible has happened. By mistake the man trimmed more than was necessary from Jason’s forehead.

Put yourself in the boy’s shoes.

How are you feeling? Angry? Very sad?

Are you feeling too embarrassed to meet your friends?

Maybe you feel like crying?”



Picture 3

Educators have to realise that they cannot teach empathy without referring to other common sentiments or emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, satisfaction, shyness, relief and jealousy.

The following examples are more difficult because students need to associate themselves with adults and their feelings.

#### Picture 4

“Mr Callus is a vet and the father of Adriana. She keeps a rabbit called Brownie as her pet and she loves him very much. Adriana noticed that her rabbit was not eating at all, so she asked her father to examine him. Mr Callus was worried because he knew how much Adriana enjoyed the company of Brownie. On examining him he found out that the rabbit was sick. He therefore gave him an injection and examined him again two days later. Luckily the rabbit was healthy.

Imagine you are Mr Callus.

Why were you so worried when you found out that the rabbit was not well? How did you feel when you examined the rabbit the second time?

How are you feeling now that you know you

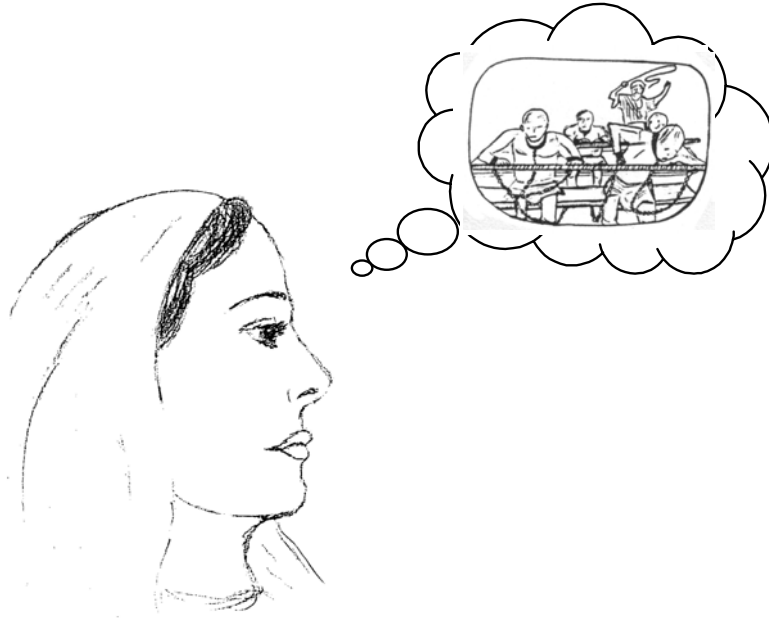
saved the rabbit’s life?”



picture 4

In the context of history education, it is more difficult to exercise empathy because you have, first and foremost, to enter into the historical context, that is, you have to go back to the times indicated, and to understand the mentality of persons living at a given time and place.

Here is an example.



Picture 5

**Picture 5**

“Marija is Gozitan living in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Her husband Žeppi was captured by corsairs.

Imagine you are Marija. What do you feel when you think of your husband? Do you feel sad? Do you pity your husband? Why? What sort of suffering, if any, are you both going through?”

It is not very difficult to empathise with persons you associate yourself with, but quite difficult to empathise with those having different opinions or with those you consider to be your ‘enemies’. For example it would be much more difficult to empathise with the corsairs than with Marija or her husband Žeppi.

The development of the skill of empathy would make us better persons, enabling us to understand others and to show them compassion even though we do not necessarily agree with them. This is a skill, which educators should help pupils to develop from an early age. Hopefully, in their adulthood, our pupils would feel competent and effective in this area.

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