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Empathy Unfolds Slowly In A Child

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By NATALIE ANGIER

THE human capacity for empathy may be deep, but, as history makes clear, it is neither bottomless nor guaranteed. Researchers who study empathy in children have tracked the stages of its leisurely unfolding, and they have learned which sorts of conditions are likely to yield a graceful, compassionate person, and which a self-pitying or indifferent or hostile individual.

Dr. Martin Hoffman of New York University proposes that empathy develops in roughly four stages and is not fully in place until just before adolescence. In the first stage, the baby has no sense of separation between self and other, and its ability to empathize is limited to a general expression of distress on witnessing or hearing another's distress. A 9-month-old girl, for example, on seeing another child fall and hurt itself, will respond by burying her face in her mother's lap.

By the age of 14 months or so, when the child begins mastering a sense of individuality, Dr. Hoffman says she may, upon seeing another hurt child, begin her first awkward attempts at consolation; but the boundaries between self and other are still a bit blurry, and that consolation may take the form, for example, of the little girl leading the stricken child to her own mother for help.

By 2 years of age, the child reaches the third stage, recognizing the difference between self and other. But it is only late in childhood that a person displays a sophisticated cognitive form of empathy: feeling not what another person appears to be feeling, but what the person should be feeling given all that the first person understands about the second one's condition. So, for example, if you see a child playing happily, but you know the child has cancer and is going to die soon, you as a fully empathic observer do not feel joy.

Dr. Mark A. Barnett, a professor of psychology at Kansas State University in Manhattan, proposes that the route to caring for others begins with a solid sense of self. Just as biologists suspect that only those highly intelligent animals capable of recognizing themselves in a mirror can put themselves empathically in a fellow's furry shoes, so a child must feel in control of his own identity before attending to the pleas of the larger world.

"A child whose own emotional needs are taken care of is more responsive to the emotions of others," Dr. Barnett said. "A child who is insecure has difficulty vicariously experiencing emotions of someone else."

In studies of preschoolers, "it's been shown that children who have been abused don't respond empathically to distress in other children," he said.

"They may look at the distressed child and do nothing, or they go over and yell and push the child," he added.

Beyond being loved, a child learns empathy by example. Empathetic parents generally rear empathetic children, said Dr. Barnett, particularly when those compassionate gestures extend beyond the members of the immediate family. Children figure out soon enough that parents who care only for their offspring in truth care only for themselves.

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