Have you ever told someone about a time you received bad service at a restaurant, only for him or her to respond with, “Must be nice to be able to afford to go out to eat!”? Or what about a time when you had a particularly tough day at work, and were sharing it with a friend only to hear, “That’s nothing, you should hear about MY day!”? In both of these examples, the response offered is not what you wanted to hear, and most likely didn’t make you feel any better about the situation. Confiding in others is not always easy but is an important part of building relationships and self-care. When we share our feelings with others we are often looking for an empathetic response. We don’t want to be judged, we often don’t want advice and we definitely don’t want to be told how we should feel.

Empathy, like many social skills, is a difficult skill to master and a skill that must be consciously taught. Problems often arise when people struggle to express empathy. Common problems include hurt feelings, miscommunication, bottling up emotions and even bullying.

**What is empathy and how is it different from sympathy?**

- Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.
- Sympathy is defined as having pity or sorrow for another person.
- Empathy is when you try to put yourself in someone else’s shoes.
- Empathy is a high level concept, but can be taught to children of every age.

Researcher and speaker Brené Brown has a great video that plainly shows what empathy looks like.

**How can I teach empathy to young children?**

- **The Golden Rule** – It may sound silly but this is a great place to start. It’s as simple has having a conversation with your students and asking them, “If someone pinched you, how would you feel?” or “How would you feel if someone called you a name?” Have them describe the feelings they would have in these situations to help them understand why they should treat others as they want to be treated. Use this fun video from Sesame Street to start the discussion.

- **Encouraging Acts of Kindness** – Start the day by encouraging students to help one friend during the day. As the day closes, meet as a group and allow children to describe something nice they did for another person during the day. Ask them how that made them feel, and how they think it made the person that they helped feel. We all know that young kids rarely do anything unless it makes them feel good; help them recognize the positive reinforcement they get from showing kindness. If kids can understand the positive feelings they received from being kind, they will want to do it more in the future.

**How can I teach older children about empathy and bullying?**

- **Teach Students to Ask for Help** – Students may be in the position of a bystander or victim and not know what to do. Fear and hopelessness may quickly set in and further halt these students from
seeking help. Open the doors for more conversation by simply teaching the skill of how to ask for help. When you encourage students to ask for help, you encourage them to be willing to stand up to bullying and to no longer accept it as a norm. Get more tips on teaching kids to stand-up as a bystander from the author of *The Power of Bystanders, Kip Jones*.

- **Teach Accepting Differences** – Oftentimes bullying stems from a person’s inability to accept anything or anyone that is different from their idea of normal. These students may need help finding common ground with other students, and learn when it’s appropriate to comment on others’ differences. For example, these students may need to be taught that sometimes, silence is the best response, or “If you can’t say anything nice, do not say anything at all.”

- **Teach Kids to Read Body Language** – In most cases, those who “bully” have little regard for other people’s feelings. They are focused on their own needs and desires. These students may need extra coaching on how to read others’ feelings through their facial expressions. They may need to be taught how to express empathy and then practice using empathetic statements. To help you facilitate learning for students grades 5-8, we have provided a free lesson plan from *No Room for Bullies: Lesson Plans for Grades 5-8*, available from Boys Town Press.

Teaching kids the skills needed to interact and build relationships is often overlooked when we think of bullying. Get more resources on teaching social skills from Boys Town Press.