

## Web-Based Radio Show

### Empathy:


*We will take a look at how empathy presents itself in a healthy individual, then in an individual with special needs. We will then look at some of the variations of empathy, then look at the developmental pathways*

**Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.**

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Good morning. I want to welcome you all to our web-based radio show. Today starts a series of days that will focus on topics that are especially relevant to both children with special needs and children without special needs. These are topics that are especially relevant to adults as well. What we are going to be doing is charting the development of key personality characteristics or key mental capacities such as the ability for empathy, the ability to read emotional signals and understand others, the ability for advanced levels of creative thinking, and so forth. Each week we are going to focus on one of these critical topics. They are critical for a number of reasons. One, it is often believed that children with special needs are not able to master some of these critical capacities, such as empathy or the ability for theory of mind – understanding other people’s feelings. Yet we have been able to show that many children with special needs, not all, are able to master these critical abilities. The ability to master these capacities, however, depends on providing certain types of experiences for children that help them learn how to be empathetic or how to read emotional signals. And just like with any child, if you teach the wrong things, they won’t learn the right things. So if you teach a child math in the wrong way, they may learn to memorize a few math facts but not be able to do calculus or geometry. On the other hand, if you teach the foundations for math properly, many children can aspire to advanced levels of mathematical thinking.

We are not born to be empathetic. We are not born to be reflective mathematical thinkers. Some of us may appear to have more potential, but it takes learning in all areas to develop high level skills. Human beings are unique, in a sense, in that our biology gives us some basic foundations for learning, but it doesn’t learn for us. That has to happen by learning opportunities in our environment. There is a good




reason during evolution for this. By only equipping us with the basic foundations for learning, Mother Nature allowed us to adapt to the different environments that we grow up in. So if we grow up in one environment where it was cold, we could learn coping skills to deal with cold weather. If we grow up in another environment where it is too hot, we could learn coping skills to deal with too much heat. If we have to find our food in trees, we learn to be better climbers. If we had to find our food in the ground, we learn to be better diggers.

Mother Nature equipped us so that we could adapt to our environment. So it meant that much of the learning – much of the critical components for development occurs after we are born and after the architecture for our nervous system is already developed. So what are the critical learning steps for one of the most important characteristics of the human mind?

Today we are going to focus on one of the ones that is vital for both children with special needs and for all children as well, and for all adults as well. That is for the capacity for empathy. Empathy is a good one to start with because, again to emphasize the point, it is often assumed that individuals with special needs are not capable of this advanced human capacity. Yet as I have emphasized many times, we find that many – perhaps not all – children and adults with special needs can be highly empathetic and highly understanding, and many even more so than their typical peers, particularly if they have had the right kind of learning experiences.

First let's take a look at how empathy presents itself in a healthy individual, then in an individual with special needs has mastered this ability, and then look at some of the variations of empathy that we see, then look at the developmental pathways.

First when we have an adult who is capable of empathy, we see an adult who can understand how another person feels; a good friend who tunes into one's feelings and listens to one's sorrow or one's joys, and you get a sense that they truly understand you. They truly are there with you. Their questions and their emotional tone that they have and the way they look and their body posture all convey a sense that they can be in your shoes with you. Yet at the same time they retain some of their independence so they are not so much in your shoes that they exaggerate your feelings. We all have the experience with a friend or a relative or a parent who when we are upset they get so upset with us we wind up calming them down rather than them helping to calm us down. They get in our shoes but then they take over our shoes and they live there.




That is not empathy. We also have the experience with individuals who sort of listen in a mechanical way, and maybe ask a few correct questions but we don't get the sense that they really understand or really care about what we are saying. That is a good try, it's a person who wants to be empathetic, but doesn't quite have it at the feeling level; can do it a little bit intellectually.

We also have the experience of adults who are very good at reading people. They are extraordinary at working the crowd at a cocktail party. They are extraordinary at getting people to buy this or that product. They were great during their dating years at seducing this or that person. They were great during their working years at getting people to do what they wanted them to do. Typically such a person, though, may have troubles in long term intimate relationships because their ability to read people and their ability to understand people are used, for the most part, in a self-serving way, in sometimes what are called "narcissistic ways." They exploit and take advantage. They are the proverbial "Snake Oil Salesman." But they have great skills at understanding people, except they use it for their own selfish purposes, not to truly understand others.

So empathy shouldn't be confused with the capacity to simply understand where other people are coming from. Again, because this can be misused in a manipulative way or a self-serving way or a selfish way. We have all had experiences of friends and colleagues who have done that and who do that and some of us probably do it some of the time. Sometimes we wish we wouldn't do it. But sometimes we do it even though we don't want to do it. We certainly see it in children who will manipulate to get their way. They feign interest or feign concern sometimes for some other purpose.


So how do we distinguish true empathy from all these lesser than optimal capacities? Well, again the true empathetic individual is the person who not only understands and can almost rephrase what you are saying and thinking, but resonates with you emotionally. Their tone of voice resonates with the way you feel. The look in their eye resonates with the way you feel. Yet they maintain enough of their own sense of self. They retain enough of who they are as a person to help you so they can comfort and sooth without getting in your shoes and taking over like the over-identifier. So they are neither too aloof nor too intrusive nor too manipulative. They hit that right note of warm, empathetic concern. That's where the word empathy arises. It's a shorthand term that takes paragraphs to describe.



Now, can't children with special needs achieve empathy as well as children without special needs? Absolutely. We now have a number of teenagers who are getting ready to go to college who were all diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders. Many of them are more empathetic than the average children. They are able to comfort their parents when their parents are upset and they ask questions like, "Gee, mom, you seem like you had a rough day today. What happened?" and mom will talk about how their friend was mean to them at lunch and one such child was able to talk about how he understands because children at school do the same thing to him sometimes – they make a joke at his expense and he gets upset but he knows he gets more upset than he should get and after he thinks about it for a few minutes he's not so upset anymore. So it's remarkable that a 17 year old child could not only help his mother talk about her bad day when he saw the grumpy look on her face, but then related to experiences of his own and talked about how he over-reacts sometimes at school and gives his mother some advice in the bargain. That's true empathy. We hadn't assumed that children with special needs could do that. Indeed, as this child illustrates, and many others, not only can they do it, they do do it. And they do it often if they have had the opportunities to learn this important skill.


This is a hard skill for children without special needs, let alone children with special needs because the experiences that lead to it are not always readily forthcoming for any child. So let's look at the roots of this. How does it develop? And how can all children learn to master this – children without special needs as well as children with special needs?

The first step occurs early in life. As I go through the steps – the stages of empathy and how it develops, I want to make one important caveat. At each stage of empathy development, you have the chance to regroup; a chance to practice; a chance to experience; a chance to create experiences for your child that will help them master earlier stages that may have not been mastered the first time around. So don't feel that if you didn't do that in the first six months of life or you didn't accomplish this by age two, that you're lost and can't develop the ability. The capacity for empathy, like the capacity for love, like the capacity for devotion and respect, can be developed ideally anytime, but it's a little harder the older you get if you haven't laid the foundations. It is achievable, but you have to work a little more at it. So, for example, before we go into the pathways and the roadmap, a child who has grown up in an orphanage in Eastern Europe and comes to this country at age four, may not have had the experiences that




enable a high level of empathy. There may have been a lot of emotional deprivation and that child may be on a survival mode, just trying to get food and get some basic affection. He may appear very manipulative or impersonal in his relationships, seeking out warmth from almost any adult. However, we found after working intensely with such children and providing extra nurturing, loving, and warmth, and figuring out how their nervous system works, and how to help them negotiate some of their basic needs more effectively, that they too can learn to be highly empathetic adults. But it will take a number of years in a very warm and nurturing family situation and sometimes and often with a great deal of therapy. So it is never too late, we feel. But we have to try as best we can to create experiences as early as possible to make this developmental journey a smooth one, rather than one that requires lots of catch-up at later ages. One should never be discouraged and there are always opportunities at any stage of development to embody in the experiences made available the earlier as well as the later ones.

Let's go back now to the beginning and see how this starts. With a new baby, one of the first lessons in empathy is that first loving warm relationship, that nurturing engagement, that ability not only to become a part of the human world by looking, listening, and attending to it in what we call shared attention, but also to engage with warmth and love in that first joyful relationship often with your primary caregiver – maybe mommy, maybe daddy, maybe grandmother, or maybe a daycare nanny. But there is some adult who will hopefully be loving and devoted and one will feel that warmth from them. Now why does empathy begin here? This has nothing to do with, after all, figuring out another person's feelings. But remember we talked about the Snake Oil Salesman who doesn't really care about anyone else, only about their own needs and reads emotional signals to manipulate. Well, if one doesn't have this early primary nurturing empathetic relationship, one doesn't really enter the human race in terms of really caring for other human beings. The port of entry is for real caring and real devotion is that first relationship; that first caring and that first warmth. So the depth of that warmth and the depth of that love that wants experiences is the depth of the love that one carries in one's heart and that's the depth of one's empathy for other people's sorrows and joys and pleasures. Again, if it is superficial, if it is a relationship based on just needs, that's all one knows. It's not that one is a mean person if one is need-oriented later in life. That may have been the only relationship we knew. Until we know a deeper one, we don't know what it feels like. You can only be as empathetic as you were empathized with yourself.



The other facet of that first relationship is you experience empathy for the first time when you are little upset, your mother or your father or your other caregivers rock you to the rhythm of your upsetness. They resonate with your screeching hunger. They resonate with your rage. They resonate with your joy and your excitement. As you feel that resonance through the way they rock you and the way they look at you and the way they engage you, you are experiencing your first lessons in empathy. Empathy is a type of feeling that you have to experience it to have it. The nice thing about human emotions are, and particularly in advanced emotions like empathy is you learn them through your experiences. Things like fear and some basic rage are pretty much present early in life. You don't have to have a lot of training to get scared or enraged. But empathy and love and compassion – these require a lot of experiences. They are not wired in our nervous system.


So the depth of that first relationship is the beginning. Again, that can occur at any time. Then what happens is very, very important. The baby, by 8-9 months, is learning to be a two-way communicator. We've talked about this in terms of back-and-forth or opening and closing circles of communication with emotional signals. Well now, little Johnny or Suzie is learning not just to engage in a relationship, but to actually read and respond to different emotional signals. They see mommy's facial expression when she gets excited, when she's joyful, when she's annoyed – and those are experienced and responded to differently. So when mommy looks a little annoyed you see little 8 month old Suzie pull away a little bit. When mommy gives a big smile, Suzie gives a big smile back. When mommy vocalizes surprise, Suzie vocalizes surprise. When mommy vocalizes fear, you'll see Suzie looking cautious and looking around like "what's going on here?" So we have the back-and-forth exchange of emotional signals and this is the beginning of two things. Knowing that another person is separate from you and part of the outside world; part of the outside emotional world. That is essential for empathy because you have to know there is another person out there who is not part of you, or else you tend to over-identify in terms of, "oh, we're all part of the same person." So in order to not over-identify and recognize that someone is different, you need to see the feelings as coming from the outside of you, not in you, which is your mommy's feelings or your daddy's feelings. In addition, in order to empathize you have to read emotional signals. You have to sense, not just to intellectually understand the difference between anger and joy, but actually sense it and feel it in your body. When we empathize with a person, it is intuitive and quick, our body is responding and our voice tone is responding before we actually figure out what they are feeling. That's why we say to ourselves that



they are feeling angry or sad or happy or joyful. So that feeling, that quick emotional response to the other person's emotions is learned through what we call "reciprocal back-and-forth interactions" or "emotional cuing." This is a foundation, also, for empathy. Then if that goes well, we get to another stage where we form a complex sense of ourselves and we learn to do what we call, "shared social problem solving." Here between about 10 months and 18 months, we see little Johnny or Suzie solving problems with their mommies or daddies – taking daddy to the toy area and pointing to the toy they want and daddy nodding empathetically and warmly and helping Johnnie or Suzie get the toy. Well, this shared social problem solving is the beginning of learning to cooperate; learning to work together. We see it with peers too, by 18 months children are playing together, taking turns going up the slide, mussing up each other's hair and giggling together at a shared joke. They aren't just knocking each other down like you might see in a 14 month old or crying when each other gets upset, now they are actually sharing humor together. Together with Billy Press, a dear colleague over at the National Institutes of Health, we did a study of toddlers and found that we could identify a stage when they were about 18 months old when they began sharing humor together; some a little earlier. So this is now the ability to not just identify feelings and react to feelings but actually participate in large patterns of cooperation where we copy other people. We identify with them. And we begin getting the sense of collaborative and cooperative endeavors – working together to solve problems.

Empathy is really working together with another person and their emotional challenges or their emotional joys. So the beginning of this kind of social collaboration is in that time of what we call "shared social problem solving" between 10 – 18 months of life. We see it happening when we have many circles of back-and-forth communication in a row where we, instead of just 3-4 circles like we saw in an 8 month old we actually have 50-60 circles of communication, all towards collaborative problem solving.


The first signs of altruism, from our colleagues doing research on altruistic behaviors were reported at around 18 months of age where a child will go up to mommy, for example, and pat her on the arm if she looked upset. Or if another child bangs himself you may see a child give him a hug or pat him on the back. So we see the first signs of behavioral altruism, now this was thought to be a sign of empathy but this isn't really empathy in the way we typically think about empathy because empathy requires understanding intellectually as well as emotionally how another person is feeling. It requires really being concerned about the other person. We don't really



know if altruism, here it is just a copy-cat behavior because you saw mommy do it or daddy do it, or is it a sincerely felt truly empathetic response? But it is certainly a part of what we call “collaborative problem solving” because you are entering into another world and whether you are doing it because you are copying it or because you truly feel it, you are now participating in this collaboration to help the other person feel better, for whatever motives you have. It may not be true empathy yet, but it is certainly a strong landmark on the road or pathway towards empathy.


Now the next big step occurs when we see pretend play and the use of words coming in between 18 months and about 2 ½ or 3 years of age. Now children get involved with mommy or daddy on the floor in shared pretending. They get involved with other children in shared pretending where they are able to feed the dollies together or mommy is the hungry dolly and little Junior or little Sally is feeding the mommy dolly. And what happens with the shared pretend play and why is this important for empathy? When the shared pretend play we are now at a symbolic level, the level of words and ideas, sharing our world with someone else. So the child and the mommy or the child and his or her friend are part of the same world of shared images, both feeding dollies together or both going to school together. They are sharing feelings – anger and joy and hunger and sleepiness, all together through the doll play. Again, this now elevates this shared feeling we saw at the level of engagement when they were four months of age where they shared smiles together, now the dolls are smiling together or the dolls are sad together. Through this shared feeling now symbolically, the child is now not only beginning to feel empathetically but to think empathetically. We have the beginning of creative empathy.

Now then, the next step is after we get to the stage of shared meanings, which is so important for empathy, that you can really understand what someone else is saying, that’s part of that creative process that we are talking about and imagining together, we get to the stage where children are learning to build logical bridges between their ideas or learning to think in a cause-and-effect way. “I’m happy because you gave me a toy.” “I’m sad because you won’t let me go out and play.” And they say this to mommy. Mommy says, “Why are you so mad today?” “Because I want that new toy you won’t buy me.” Now empathy goes to another level where the child can reason about how you are feeling. So now the child can tell you, “I’m mad because you won’t let me go out and play.” He can also say, “Mommy, why are you mad?” That is the beginning of not just sharing your feeling with you, not getting mad with you or sad with you but




wondering why you are mad and helping you figure it out. It is the beginning of being able to now separate your world from the child's world. The child can now separate his internal world from your world, but still be concerned about your world. So the child can take an interest in your world, want to know why you are happy or sad, and yet feel different themselves and yet be concerned. So this is the beginning of the more advanced stages of empathy where the child can begin to separate who they are from who you are but still be interested in you and your feelings. They can then begin relating it to their feelings, not yet in a very complex way, but in a very basic way.

Now if that goes well, we see the child get into yet a more complicated stage of empathy where they learn to not only think in a cause-and-effect way or a logical way and inquire about your feelings and inquire why you are feeling a certain way, but now they can explore with you multiple reasons for your feelings and multiple reasons for their feelings. And they can begin looking at shades of gray. They can begin saying, "Gee, I'm really mad, mommy." And you say, "How mad are you?" "Well, I'm very, very, very mad" or "I'm only a little, little mad today." And if they inquire about your feelings, they can say, "Mommy, how mad are you? Are you a little mad or a whole lot mad?" And if you say you are mad because you had a hard day at work, they can ask for other reasons too. "Was there anything else that made you mad?" So now they are beginning to expand their thinking about feelings, closer to the adult version of empathy. Exploring the shade of gray between different feelings. Exploring the different reasons for feelings. Comparing how you feel and daddy feels when they are mad. So now their empathy is expanding and if that happens they are able to also be able expand into what we call "playground politics" where they become part of a social group at school where they can look at how they fit in with other children. Who is the angriest? Who is the second angriest? Who is the third angriest? Who is the most happy? Who is the second most happy? Who is the best soccer player? Who is the best mathematician? Who is the best dancer? Who is the cutest? Who is the best dresser? We all know our 8, 9, or 10 year olds are coming home and seeing themselves on a social hierarchy in the playground, comparing themselves to all other children. Sometimes it's very painful if our children feel they are not as good as other children in certain things. This is also the beginning of being part of a larger social group. As I like to tell parents, a child who is taking their hit at this point - feeling disappointed or dejected because they aren't the best at everything is that this is the healthiest thing to happen to them - far better than learning for the first time when they are 19 and get rejected by their first boyfriend or girlfriend or good friend of any gender because




disappointments that come at the first time as a late teenager is hard to deal with. If it comes for the first time as a 9 year old when you can cry on mommy's shoulder is pretty easy. But a 19 year old might be embarrassed to cry on mommy's shoulder and it's much harder.

Here is where being part of a social group now allows a child to broaden their capacity for empathy. They can actually empathize with the whole group and a whole series of others. They can sense the mood of the classroom. They can sense the spirit of a larger group of individuals. They can feel a part of the group. They can identify with their friends at school as a group. "I am a part of Bethesda Elementary" which is where my kids went to school. "My high school is playing your high school in this sport or having a drama or a debate or a math club playoff..." So now there is the identification with the group, the empathy with the whole social group, which is so much an important part of the glue that holds societies together, begin to empathize across individuals to a large group of individuals where you share certain feelings and share certain goals and share some aspirations and share certain features such as a regional identity. Obviously this creates problems too when it is the basis for war or the basis for one high school warring with another high school or one nation warring with another nation. Here is where we see the goals for the future. How can we expand and extend empathy so that people begin empathizing with all those other humans who populate the earth so there is a global identification, not just a family identification or a regional or national identification. We see this in schools, when children get overly concerned with just their little peer group and exclude others. There is an "us vs. them" mentality. We see the roots for this right in the playground politics. So we can help our children right then and there expand their empathetic range; expand their capacity to identify; expand their capacity to understand beyond what they experience immediately; beyond their group of "cool kids" or their group of "not so cool kids." Can they empathize with children with different skin colors and different religious backgrounds? Here it can be very healthy and very helpful to extend the child's empathetic range to individuals who are not like them. Here is it very helpful to have children with special needs and children without special needs in the same classes as part of integrated classes because it enables each one to understand the other in terms of different abilities and different capacities. It is very helpful for the children without special needs to be able to relate with others who have difficulties and challenges and to see how all people have challenges in different degrees and different ways. It is helpful for children with special needs to deal with their challenges to see children who



don't have these challenges. As a child with special needs becomes able to progress through these stages and all the stages I have been mentioning, we find that some children with special needs can progress through all of these, but they have to go step by step but as they are becoming more self aware and they learn to be not just symbolic thinkers and getting involved in pretend play but also cause-and-effect thinkers, and then as they learn to be thinkers who can look for multiple reasons for things and see shades of gray, then as they can size up the group and as they can confront that very painful realization of "I'm different, mommy why can't I walk as well as Johnny or Suzie?" or "Why can't I throw the ball?" or "Why is it harder for me to learn spelling or math?" or "Why is it easier for me to learn spelling and math?" Many children with special needs have gifts in some of the academic areas. Or "Why, mommy, do I get more upset when the children tease me than I see some of the other children get?" As children learn these differences, this is the first step in self-definition. This is the first step in experiencing disappointment; experiencing sadness. But without disappointment and sadness, that child can't have true joy and can't have a true sense of self and can't have a true identity because what defines our identity and defines our sense of self and what defines our joy in life is the ability to know who we are; to have a sense of self. A sense of self is defined by the different feelings and is defined by what I call "boundary defining feelings," feelings which tell us who we are. Without being disappointed, we don't know what we are not. And what we wish we could be. Without anger we don't know what frustrates us. Without joy and excitement we don't know what makes us happy. So each feeling, in essence, defines who we are. But each of these feelings that defines who we are, defines a new realm of empathy. So if we have experienced disappointment and sadness we can empathize with others. It deepens our humanity. We know what it feels like when another child is hurt or disappointed. We know what mommy feels like or daddy feels like. But if we have never had that, if everything has gone easy for us, sure we can say the empty words, "I know how you feel" but it's meaningless. Or if we are so self-centered that we have never experienced true sadness, we can say the words but it won't be meaningful.


So to truly empathize with another person's happiness, joy, sadness, or despair, we will have had to experience at least some of that ourselves. Hopefully not so intensely that it derails us or disorganizes us, or throws us into real depression. There is a difference between sadness and disappointment that we can work through, and true depression which tends to engulf us temporarily and hopefully we will come out of that also with a deeper sense of empathy. It is not surprising that many of the children who



have special needs that we work with achieve a high level of empathy or just relationships or interesting professions in terms of future work. Because they have a real skill that sometimes gets beyond their peers because they had to struggle a bit more with their feelings, because they have had more disappointments or more challenges. That can deepen one's sense of humanity. It is hard with an 8 or 9 year old, but with the support of a family and empathy of a family, it can be a real asset for the future.

Now if that goes well, we get to yet another level of empathy and that's the last level we will talk about right now. It is the ability to empathize in a truly reflective manner. This means the ability to have an organized sense of self; to know who you are; to have gone through these self-defining experiences around sadness and happiness and joy and sorrow and disappointment, and to have a good sense of who you are, and to be able to understand, therefore, a range of feelings in others and compare it to yourself. Now this is a hard job – to have a stable sense of who you are as a self, to jump into someone else's shoes to feel what they feel in an empathetic way, and to still retain your own person, to know who you are. So you are constantly going back-and-forth between yourself and their experiences. This helps you be a truly great friend, truly an empathetic partner, helps you understand not just individuals but whole groups of people based on your experiences because if you have been prejudiced against you know how it feels to be prejudiced against – not fully, but somewhat. And it helps you be a fuller human being in a truly empathetic sense. It's a hard thing to achieve because now you are reflecting on your self and your own feelings and reflecting on someone else. And you're not so identifying that you are getting into their shoes and taking over. You're not losing who you are as you identify with them. And you're not having to remove yourself from them, and you are able to understand their individual feelings because of this progression that we have been talking about.


So this is what we mean by a healthy sense of empathy. We see the first signs of this, interestingly, even during adolescence when kids are supposed to be self-centered, it is not as fully developed, then it becomes more developed through the adult years, through late adolescence, going off to college, with closer friendships, and friendships replacing a lot of family relationships, even more so than they do in high school where this has already started. Then with serious relationships and serious friendships and love relationships, these feelings deepen and new feelings come up. There are new levels of empathy because love has a different meaning in an intimate relationship than



it did even with a best friend. Then there is having a family of one's own if one elects to have a family of one's own. The empathy for children, the empathy for one's spouse or one's partner over a long period of time. New empathy for one's parents as they move through their more advanced cycles of life. So experience keeps broadening.

If we have this foundation, though, of a secure sense of self and the ability to reflect on who we are, and the ability to go back-and-forth between the self and the other person and their feelings, that becomes a foundation then for this expanding range of feelings; of new experiences that keep developing throughout the course of life. As we get older, we have new empathy for new facets of relationships. We see illness in a new way. We see the cycle of life in a new way. Hopefully in middle age, we also become more involved in the world as a globe and become more concerned, as many people do in adulthood and middle age, in politics and empathizing with the world as a whole. I won't beleaguer these points except to say that a healthy sense of empathy never stops. It is a continually expanding dimension of life and the foundations, though, are set in these stages that I have outlined. Again, the key point is with children with special needs, they require the same steps, and they often require more practice. So when you are doing pretend thinking – even more shared pretend play. When you are involved in cause-and-effect thinking – even more “why” questions. When you are involved in playground politics – four or more play dates a week to help the child join in and understand peer relationships. When you are learning reflective thinking – lots of opinions, no rote memory skills, lots of “Why do you think that?” and “How would you feel in that situation?” and “If you wrote that book that Twain wrote, what would you think of Huck Finn?” More of those kinds of experiences. As we do that with our children with special needs, as well as with children without special needs, we develop empathy more and more for all children. But the foundations begin in that first loving relationship. Here is where the children with special needs sometimes have an advantage because we tend to spend more time with them. Sometimes we don't spend the right kind of time. If that time is warm and nurturing and loving, following your child's natural interests, building their capacities for interacting and relating from the child's natural interests and the child's natural joys and sorrows, then we build stronger foundations for empathy for all the children we do this for.

Thank you for listening to this long talk on empathy. This is the first of a series of talks about critical traits for our children. What I want to do now is shift to a few




questions that we have. My dear colleague, Serena Wieder is with me and she is going to read the first question, and then she and I will both comment on them.

SW: Ok, these questions don't exactly relate to what we have been talking about, but you can call those in if you like. Do you mind if I add a comment on some of the things you were talking about? Let me just do that first. I was just thinking of how there are so many little ways that we can build on some of these experiences that you were talking about. One thing that I did want to note was that empathy really has to embrace all emotions and there isn't a should/shouldn't or which feelings are ok and which aren't. So often I notice that when a child begins to explore some of the more negative types of emotions – the jealousy or the aggression or the competition or the disappointment, there is a tendency to kind of back away from those. But if your child is doing this in play or through his interest in a certain story or a character or a figure, just go there. Remember, empathy doesn't mean it gets acted out, it means it's the opportunity to better understand and more deeply understand some of these experiences. Kind of just double check with yourself if there is a reason that you are just trying to make the bad guys good or you just want to be nice all the time or you rush to fix everything if something is lost or broken. So that's something to really keep note of. Throughout the day you will see there are so many opportunities to notice how your child is feeling, and check in with that. And also, find out if he can figure out what someone else is feeling, "Oh, what will daddy say when he comes home and sees what you have done?" Or deepen the plot when you are going into the stories and pause and take some time to ask your child's ideas and feelings and alternatives.

On another level, another thing that I would also urge you to consider is how do we get children to be empathic? One nice way is to start getting them to do things for other people. So even when you are working together and you are doing chores or your child is helping you or you notice that someone else is in need, send your little guy over and see what he can do. These are all the subtle messages, day in and day out, that can help provide those experiences.


The first question is: *I have a 5 year old daughter with ADHD and PDD. She is currently in kindergarten in a regular classroom. We are moving and have decided to keep her back in kindergarten for one more year due to her young age – she just made the cut-off last year and because of emotional issues and behavioral issues. We have the option of sending her to a Montessori School in our new location. We are doing*



*Floortime. Do you have any experience with this type of child in a Montessori style of education?*


SG: The Montessori Schools can be excellent but some of them can also tend to not sufficiently encourage interaction among the children. In other words, there is a focus on each child doing their own activities to facilitate particular skills, and sometimes there's not enough time spent on what I view as an important component of the group activity or the group components. Now every Montessori School like every non-Montessori School is very, very different, so I hesitate to generalize. It really depends on the director of the school and the teachers and the atmosphere in the class. Again, I have seen many, many wonderful Montessori Schools as I do many wonderful general schools and schools that have other philosophies also. What I have been impressed with over the years is that you really can't go by the philosophy of the school unless there is something very, very extreme. Certainly the Montessori philosophies and typical educational philosophies have been around for a long time and they have worked very well for many children. But again, some schools, whether they are Montessori or not Montessori, I see a tendency toward not enough social interaction; not enough pairing kids with each other, working collaboratively, working constructively or working in groups. And in some programs there is an emphasis on structured activity rather than creative activity, which I like to see, particularly in the early years in terms of time for pretending, time for use of imagination, in terms of creative writing as children learn to write, and so forth. So the key is for that particular caller, is to look at the individual teacher and her assistants and helpers, and the philosophy of that particular school. And certainly Montessori as a philosophy is an excellent one, but the question is how it is implemented. There is no substitute for getting to know that school and the children in it and the classes. What you want is a balance between creativity and spontaneous and social interaction, and learning the skills that you need to learn – to focus, to attend, to problem solve, to follow through and learning some of your pre-academic basics. Ok, do you want to go to the next question, Serena? Or do you want to add onto that one first?

SW: I would agree. Montessori sometimes has the advantage in the later school years like elementary school because they don't grade, so they are more flexible in grouping children in terms of their academic abilities. The best thing is to go see what this particular school is about.



The next question is: *My son and I spend about an hour and a half in the car to see a therapist twice a week. I was wondering what you all do while you are in the car to keep your child's attention, to get them to interact – even in such a non-ideal setting.*

Well, that is a very good question because we know how many people are spending lots of time in the car. Over the years I have come up with some notions of “car games.” There are some advantages of being in the car – your child is a kind of a “fixed audience,” the issue is what will be of interest and exciting to talk about? If your child is verbal, you can certainly pursue his interests and just do some of the old traditional games like, “I went to the zoo and I saw a...” and you’ll say “zebra” and he’ll say “a bear” and you’ll say, “a zebra, bear, and a giraffe” and you work on memory and you go back-and-forth and you get silly about all the different animals. And you can do that with any special interest that they may have. You are working cognitively on categories, and you are also pursuing something. You can do visual spatial games. Try to figure out a car you might spot. If you remember, there used to be “punch buggy blue” and every time you see it you have to kick or bang the back of the seat. So try to take a look and just focus in on what is around there in the world and it could be cars or anything else that might be en route. One thing that I like to do in the car is listen to tapes – tapes of stories that you could stop and start and have control over. It gives you the opportunity to do some more pure listening. Tapes are usually quite animated with cues and you could stop and talk about it and say, “What do you think is going to happen next?” and get your child’s opinion about it. But it is a good opportunity to explore and reinforce some of the listening, the pure listening without the pictures for the moment. Some children like to be prepared for listening to a tape like that and again, the point would be where you stop and start so you can get the interaction around it. For other children it is nice to do some motor things. Get a Magna-Doodle. Have your child draw something without worrying that the pencil is going to fall off and they can show it to you. Then you can talk about what is going on there. Planning ahead, singing songs together – it really can be quite interactive, especially if you aren’t too stressed while you are driving. Have a list of things in your car that can remind you of what your child might enjoy. But the important thing really is the enjoyment. If you can have a conversation about what is coming the next day, you can work on empathy, you can talk about something that just happened. But a child who is less verbal, then I think you are going to want to work more, possibly, with certain kinds of toys. I always like to have a bag of sensory toys in the back of the car and then you can see what the child picks out and you can encourage him to do more – obviously you aren’t going to




turn around to play with him on the road. You can play “red light green light” and have your child tune in to why the police car goes slow or fast. For other kids who love to be on the road, they memorize the route and they get upset if you are on the wrong route. If you go to a different place or they begin to recognize where you are going way in advance and you can see how strong their visual memories are, but take it further. Notice that each car has a different license plate or what is the speed limit or why am I going so fast or what is that policeman doing on the road – is he helping or is he giving someone a speeding ticket? Lots of incidental learning can occur in a car. We know this is really important because this is an area where we know there are lots of gaps, particularly for children who are lagging behind in some of the auditory or language processing. So from there you move to “20 questions” or “what am I thinking of?” or working on visualization. A car can really be an active and fun place. But first match up, maybe practice some things when you aren’t in the car so they are more familiar, and you can do that extra cuing and get in front of them, then bring them to the car. It is a lot of time and a very valuable time to use.

I hope I wasn’t speaking too fast, but you can see there is a lot you can do. Ok.


*I have heard of children on the spectrum getting a 24 hour EEG. What is the test and when would it be called for? The social worker who is part of the evaluation team for my son, who is going to be placed in a pre-k program, suggests that we see a neurologist. I said my son has been diagnosed with sensory regulation and motor planning but the social worker seems to think that a visit would be a good idea to rule things out. It wasn’t more specific. The OT said, in her experience such visits don’t turn up new information and aren’t worth the money. Since I don’t have the insurance to cover this – the specialist is not on my plan – I imagine the visit won’t be cheap. What do you think? Should I make this a priority?*

SG: Generally, a 24 hour EEG or an extended sleep EEG is very useful, but only under certain circumstances. And it is always good to check with one’s pediatrician or general family physician first as well as one’s team if one has a team working with one in terms of developmental challenges. But here are some general guidelines, and obviously I can’t talk about a specific child without knowing that child very well, but in terms of general guidelines, this may be useful to many families.

There are certain children who have a regression in functioning as part of their developmental challenges. They may have been progressing nicely with certain




beginning elements of language functioning, for example, in the second year of life – beginning to repeat some words, beginning to use some words spontaneously, maybe even labeling objects from a picture book – and then around 18-24 months the parents notice the loss of some words that were already acquired, and a harder time acquiring new words and less imitation. Then sometimes gradually parents notice the child becomes a little more impulsive or distractible or even self absorbed and then sometimes more repetitive or more self stimulatory and there is a general increase then in some of the behaviors that are associated with autistic spectrum disorders or other related special needs conditions. The key word here is the regression as opposed to the child who had some of these challenges such as self absorption or being a little bit repetitive or self stimulatory from the beginning. So if there is a regression or a sudden increase in these behaviors – aggression with loss of functioning, then it is very, very useful to have a full neurological evaluation to see if you can figure out the reasons for the regression. One component of that can be the 24 hour or the extended sleep EEG because many children will have some irregularities who have had the regression, but not all children who have regression will have irregularities. They will have some subtle irregularities, I don't want to say many children, but some children with regression have subtle irregularities on the 24 hour extended sleep EEG that doesn't show up on a regular standard EEG. If this is identified, sometimes there are interventions that can be helpful. Some of the neurologists have been finding that some children, again not all children with this kind of regression and irregular patterns on the EEG, may benefit from certain medications having to do with trying to normalize the EEG patterns or correct the irregularities. But again, here, this is a very delicate decision requiring a great deal of clinical judgment, so one needs a very experienced pediatric neurologist or developmental pediatrician to help families with this determination and to see if, in fact, there are irregularities and if medication will be helpful as part of the overall intervention plan. There is no substitute for an overall intervention plan, however, that is working with the child on all their capacities including the regressive tendencies. The reason why this is important, even if there is an irregular EEG, and even if there was a clear regression, the most important element is a comprehensive program where the child is beginning to practice the healthy foundations for those skills that have been lost and the skills that are desired. So if the child has pulled away, we have to pull the child back into relationships. If the child has lost speech, we have to work on emotional signaling and also on language development. If the child has lost some motor capacity, we have to work on the child's motor skills. So it is very important to have a



comprehensive program, but for some children medication may play a role in that program or other interventions may play a role depending on the findings of the 24 hour EEG. So in general, I would say if there is a clear regression, if the child is derailed in terms of relating, thinking, and communicating skills in a fundamental sense, it is important to consider the 24 hour EEG together with one's primary care physician and other such members of your therapeutic team. If, however, the child has not experienced a regression and the child is experiencing challenges but not challenges that derail fundamental relating, thinking, and communicating, in other words the child has not lost language or the child has not lost fundamental thinking skills even though the child may be more irritable all of a sudden or maybe a little bit more self stimulatory, but hasn't lost the fundamentals, then the issue is less clear and it is not as essential to move to that high level diagnostic procedure. So the key thing is to discuss this with one's own team, but the key criteria is that if there is regression and loss of critical areas of functioning, then you will want to consider it more seriously and to make sure you have somebody in your community who can discuss this with you.

Ok, let's take the next question.


*SW: This one is about a 21 month old little boy diagnosed with PDDNOS. He has almost no expressive language, little receptive language, and we have done Floortime with him for three months with a lot of success. He is a very loving little boy, he has engagement skills that are very appropriate to his age, using signs to communicate, pointing, pushing toys back-and-forth, laughing, smiling, peek-a-boo, and initiating play with me. However, any type of structured intervention, whether it is done by me or a therapist is useless. He is very sensitive to being constrained or to having his hands moved – he just gets more and more upset until he throws his head back and starts wailing. We have had to leave two speech and one OT therapist because of his behavior. It either gets to the point where he gets hysterical when he sees the therapist or the therapist has a mysterious conflict and now can only see him during his naptime. I heard an oral/motor specialist say she couldn't treat him. I thought I'd try just five minutes of structured therapy a day but about 90 seconds after I put him in his chair he managed to knock it over backwards. I haven't been able to find a workable solution for Max. He is not a bad child and I think a creative approach may help, like trying to do structured intervention while he is in his swing instead of a chair or working on imitation while he is running and spinning rather than being held still. However, I worry that this approach*



*will not teach him to behave properly. It may be giving him undesirable behaviors rather than connected ones.*

SW: I think you have the answer, Mama! You really do. I'd like you to think of any other 21 month old baby who would want to be held down in a chair or have his body controlled by moving his hands and so on. But if you just listen to your question and see how you are contrasting, how wonderfully engaged he is getting and how spontaneous and how strong his initiation is getting, that is really what matters. You're enjoying him and having lots of back-and-forth interactions building up, and the idea of just using structure for structure's sake is not necessarily the way to go. I think you should trust your instincts. I think we should take a more creative approach. Oral/motor work is very important and if you hold him in your lap and you sooth him, if you give him some of the vestibular support in the swing, there are more creative ways to go and you should find someone who will work with you in this way. There really is no benefit for structure being used for structure's sake. Your goal is not to get your child just be compliant. Your goal is to get your child to be interactive and love to learn and be able to enjoy some of the experiences that will hopefully promote some of the areas of his development that are lacking. But your first three months working with him sound like he is on a rapid course of progress and I would stay with it.

SG: Just to add on to what Serena has been saying, this is a very common question about how much structure and discipline and how much spontaneous and creative work should we be doing with our children. The worry, understandably, that many parents have is if we are too creative and too joyful with our children and we have too much fun with them and follow their lead too much, will we be creating spoiled children who don't know the meaning of discipline? And who don't know how to then curb their appetites? This question goes back to the history of child rearing. Actually we find elements of it 2,000 years ago in the writings of the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and certainly we see it in this century when we look at things like feeding – whether to do demand feeding to feed children when they want to be fed. So there is no end to this debate of structure and discipline vs. tailoring to the child's own rhythms and patterns. In fact, healthy development, as Serena was saying, is characterized by a healthy integration of these two. But the important part about the integration, and I'll answer the question of many parents, is that the ability of a child to follow the rules and be a member of society and be a good citizen and eventually be very disciplined, comes from learning how to be:

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1. Part of relationships,
  2. Learning to communicate and reading and responding to emotional signals
  3. Learning to use ideas creatively
  4. Learning to use ideas logically

So when you are doing that in your early years, like with your 21 month old, you are actually promoting eventually the ability to be very disciplined and have good judgment and be very cooperative and be part of a group. If you prematurely try to insert the structure and it compromises the ability for the child to learn to be creative or learn to enjoy relationships or learn to think creatively and logically, then actually you'll be ironically compromising that child. So when we intrude the structure too early in a child particularly who has a sensitive nervous system, we are actually slowing down the child's ability for being disciplined and having good judgment. And that's the paradox. So by following the child's lead and creating opportunities for engaging, relating and interacting, and creative use of ideas, and eventually logical use of ideas, you are actually improving the child's ability to respond to structure. So you don't have to give up your goal, but just don't create this conflict in goals too early in the child's life. When the child is young, tailor to the child's nervous system and the child will eventually respond to structure. Remember, you're structuring a lot for the child without thinking about it in terms of sleep patterns, eating patterns, acceptable behaviors like no hitting. The child is having a lot of structure all the way through even though it's not obvious.

Well, good luck to everyone. Next week we're going to talk about another critical trait that goes hand-in-hand with empathy, and that is the ability for what is called sometimes "emotional balance and range." For a child to be well regulated, in balance, or for an adult to be well regulated and in balance, but also experience the full range of human experience; the full range of feelings, how do we have both balance and regulation, and a full range of feelings as a part of our lives. That will be for next week and then the week after we are going to talk about how we help children become disciplined and focused and attentive and good problem solvers. We look forward to seeing you next week and thank you for listening. Email your questions in during the week and we will try to pick a few and soon we will have the capacity for you actually to call in while we are live on air and then you won't have to anticipate with us and you'll be able to be more spontaneous. Thank you again, bye bye.

