CIRCLES *of*

Empathy is not just a skill; it's a broad and deep sense of care and humanity—and that's what we need to develop in children.

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James is 14 years old. Tall, handsome, funny, athletic, attuned to others, he is one of the popular, high-status students in his large freshman class. He can be remarkably caring and attentive, even at times doting, with his close friends.

But James has a dark side. Sometimes he uses his social skills to manipulate others, and he draws a bright line between those inside and outside his circle of friends. Those outside are often invisible to him—or are fair game for degradation. He sexualizes girls he finds attractive and snubs those he doesn't. Students who are isolated and vulnerable, rather than eliciting his compassion, can trigger his cruelty. When a new student shyly approaches him in the cafeteria where he is sitting with his friends, reminding James that they had met a year before at a sporting event, James's response is swift and brutal: "Get the hell out of my face."

Does Empathy = Compassion?

Empathy is a key to preventing cruelty, to strong relationships of many kinds, to success in numerous professions, and to citizenship. That's why building empathy is a central feature of the movement to promote social and emotional learning and of many bullying prevention efforts. Often, these efforts seek to promote empathy by building the related skills of perspective taking and emotional understanding. Children learn to walk in others' shoes and to identify how others feel.

It's vital that children learn these basic skills. But there's this unhappy reality: While learning to walk in others' shoes *can* spark compassion, it doesn't automatically generate compassion or result in any positive action. The distressing fact is that many children and adults, like James, are skilled at understanding others' views and feelings but don't significantly *value* those perspectives or care about the people holding them. Salespeople, politicians, actors, and marketers, for example, are often skilled at understanding other perspectives—as *New York Times* columnist Bill Keller (2013) says, "Politics is above all a business of empathy." But

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that doesn't mean they are any more likely than others to humanize or care about other people. Some even use their abilities to tune in to others' needs for destructive purposes. Consider con men and torturers, or even some siblings, who often have hawklike skills at spotting and preying on another person's vulnerabilities and fears.

Further, although we often speak of children as having a lot of or a little empathy, the issue often isn't whether or how much children can empathize, but whom they have empathy *for*. Many people, like James, value their close friends but have little concern for those outside this circle. People may only appreciate those who share their race, culture, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Indeed,

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much of what has most deeply troubled our existence since ancient times—bigotry and cruelty; epic, mindless wars; religious hatreds—can be traced in part to this failure to accept those who are different from us. Much of the project of developing caring and responsibility in children involves, therefore, enabling them to empathize with those with whom they don't feel immediate kinship, those who have fallen off their radar, or those who might be threatening or distressing to them in some way.

Finally, children's circle of concern is deeply tied to adults' universe of concern. Cultivating empathy in students thus means expanding teachers' circles of care, including helping teachers understand their own biases and why they gravitate toward certain students and not others. Teacher preferences for certain children can powerfully shape the nature of classroom social interactions and

peer relationships (see, for example, Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001)

We can't teach children empathy as if it were just a skill, like word decoding or simple addition. The kind of empathy that is crucial to develop in children is *not* simply a skill or strategy: it's born of a broad and deep sense of humanity. If we want children to be caring, responsible, and committed to justice, we must generate in them the moral capacity to truly value and care about diverse members of their communities, and we must help them overcome barriers to valuing others.

Cultivating Concern for All

Imagine two friends walking to class together. They pass a student who has dropped all the contents of her backpack and is frantically trying to collect papers that are scattering quickly in all directions. The two students see her and recognize that she is distressed; they know how they would feel if that happened to them. They also go to a school where responsibility for others and the community is a widely touted value—in fact, a statement expressing that value is actually posted on a wall right next to them.

The question is not whether the two friends can recognize that their schoolmate needs a hand, but whether they will lend one. The student who spilled her backpack isn't a friend of theirs, and they're in the middle of an intense discussion about a friend who's contemplating breaking up with her boyfriend. So they just keep walking.

Part of widening students' circle of concern is creating the expectation that all students belong to a community in which they have responsibility for one another and that they will *act* on that responsibility. In some schools, this expectation barely exists. Adults in these schools never tell students that they have obligations to their classrooms or schools as

communities or that it's important to reach out to students who are isolated or struggling socially.

Many students, like the two students just mentioned, do receive the message that they have these responsibilities. These two students, for example, probably know they should reach out to help the student who drops her books. But they may not have a deep, internalized commitment to helping those outside their immediate circle. Gossiping about a friend may be more compelling than helping someone they don't know.

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How do schools cultivate in children this deep and wide ethical commitment along with a commitment to take positive action? The key is creating social norms—lived day to day—that express these commitments. Students themselves are those best positioned to change norms of care and concern. In middle and high school, especially, students commonly take signals from other students about who and what are worthy and important. Students also have inside knowledge about social dynamics, and they tend to have more leverage with other students than adults do.

In many schools, students seek respect and power by degrading and ostracizing other students. Boys, for example, gain status with male peers

if they treat girls as objects; students categorize one another as winners and losers; students of certain ethnicities are marginalized; social ranking is pervasive; and students jockey for position. But in other schools, students are apt to admire classmates who care for a struggling or socially awkward student, view angling for social status as immature, and are quick to denounce racism or homophobia. Students in these schools may take pride in crossing social boundaries, in developing diverse friendships, and in rebelling against the class distinctions and racism that plague our larger culture. These students are finding opportunities in the social microcosm of school to do something profound— to practice the work of mending and remaking the world.

Many students want to see caring attitudes and practices become norms. In our research, for example, we asked students across a diverse range of middle schools and high schools to choose from a list of ways they might improve themselves (such as "I could be more respectful of teachers," "I could stand up for myself more effectively," "I could stand up for others more," or "I could pay more attention to those outside my circle of friends.") Over half of the students we surveyed thought they could stand up for others more effectively or better attend to those outside their friend group, and these were students' top choices. (For information on our research, see the "School Climate and Culture" section of our website at www.gse.harvard .edu/makingcaringcommon)

So how can schools create these norms?

Creating a Culture of Care

Done thoughtfully, role-plays and collaborative projects can help students not only take the perspective of others, but also value others, finding threads of kinship in those who seem different, appreciating challenges others have

overcome, and recognizing unseen strengths in others. Teachers can also engage students in conversations about who is inside and outside their circle of concern. One way to begin is to present students with a set of three concentric circles and ask them to reflect on who is in their innermost circle of concern (often family and close friends); who is in their next closest circle of concern; and finally, who is in the biggest, last circle. The teacher might then ask whether there was anyone they didn't write down; for example, did they include the school secretary or the bus driver in their circles? Were large groups of students missing, such as students of a certain

valued, making them less likely to seek power by dominating or demeaning others. Schools can support such student activism, empowering a wide range of students to help create more caring and inclusive communities. Student councils or other groups representative of the student body as a whole might develop school norms regarding respect and inclusion, determining consequences for violating those norms and identifying solutions for times when groups of students are excluded. They might create a compact or pledge, signed by all students, that articulates school standards of care and inclusion. Students in some schools have identified

one-offs. Changing social norms means engaging students systematically and substantially on an ongoing basis. Every student in a grade might, for example, take up a semester or yearlong capstone project, such as writing biographies of other students or adults in the school community who have been invisible to them or creating a video of interviews with students and school staff about what makes for a caring and just community. Schools can use the arts to present rich images of the various cultures represented in the school and to enable students who tend to slip off the radar to display their talents. (For more information about such projects, see the "Bullying Prevention" tab on our website, www.gse.harvard.edu/makingcaringcommon.)

Adults have a key role in changing social norms as well. Adults can't just give lip service to caring for others or respecting diversity. Children have a razor-sharp alertness to hypocrisy, and programs showcasing these values can backfire when children are regularly confronted with gaps between these values and their daily realities. We have been in too many schools that trumpet respect for others, yet in which some adults ignore children saying "that's so gay" and "no homo," boys making lewd comments to girls, or students being deliberately isolated or ignored.

One way for schools to hold themselves accountable is to periodically ask students and staff whether values such as caring and responsibility are promoted or violated in various school contexts. Schools can collect data from all students at least once a year to learn whether students experience the school as caring and inclusive. That information can then guide efforts to create more inclusive school norms. School adults can also create guidelines for holding both themselves and students accountable for high standards of care in every school context.

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ethnicity or the opposite gender? Students are then asked to consider how they might regularly expand their circles. This kind of activity introduces concepts and language that help groups discuss inclusion, exclusion, stereotypes, empathy, and fairness in ways that can motivate individual and group actions.

As students positively shape their environments, they feel powerful and

a place, often in the cafeteria, where any isolated or threatened student can be assured of friendly company. (For more information, see Collier, Swearer, Doces, & Jones, 2012.) Students in other schools have produced videos that promote inclusion, such as this "I Am We" video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW9EifuvaH0.

These kinds of activities will have little effect, though, if they are just

It's important that these efforts include all school adults, such as lunch staff, sports coaches, and custodians. (There are several useful surveys for this purpose under the "Bullying Prevention" tab at www.gse.harvard.edu/makingcaringcommon.)

Overcoming Barriers to Empathy

Class, racial, cultural, gender, religious, and political biases can all undermine our ability to consider and care about others' perspectives. So too can highly competitive environments in which students are frequently pitted against one another. Emotions such as envy, inferiority, and greed can blot out empathy and care. There are also great individual differences in how we respond to others' emotional states. Although experiencing vulnerability or anxiety in another awakens compassion in many people, it can stir up anxiety or anger in others, such as James in the cafeteria.

Schools clearly can't address all of these barriers, but they also can't simply locate the problem of empathy as a problem of individual children. Minimally, schools can help students develop tools to manage these barriers. Although schools can't deal in depth, for example, with every "ism" (racism, sexism, and so on), they can try to cultivate in students a set of transferable skills that will enable them to deal with many forms of discrimination. Students can become more mindful of their tendencies to stereotype, categorize, and discriminate and how those tendencies affect their responses to others' distress. They can be taught to view more critically the cultural and media messages that pigeonhole or dehumanize groups of people and to understand their own tendencies to feel powerful by demeaning those they perceive as different.

Just as important, school staff can commit to identifying and addressing at least a few key school environmental barriers. Here again, brief surveys of students and staff can be a way of drawing attention to conditions that may be impeding empathy and care. Surveys can identify, for example, the pervasiveness of classism, sexism, or homophobia; whether certain groups of students feel socially exiled; whether students feel committed to the school as a community; or whether competition is eroding a sense of community among students.

Expanding Adults' Circle of Concern

Tense, wiry, 16-year-old Mike is known to be trouble. Set off by even minor perceived slights and injustices, he often lashes out, alienating other

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students and teachers. Today, he is enraged because a teacher has taken away his cell phone because he was texting in school.

This time, Connie is ready for him. An affable and skilled teacher turned guidance counselor, Connie has trained herself to slow down and take deep breaths, to find a center of calm and gravity. "Students often know how to trigger you," she says, "and in the past they could really pull out my inner adolescent. I have said some things I regret."

"I succeeded with Mike while in the past I would have failed," she reports. "I was able to see how he was triggering me so I didn't get ticked off. I stayed calm. I tried to understand his perspective, and I was able to help him understand his teacher's perspective. We ended up having a constructive discussion about how he might handle his anger more effectively."

Empathy cannot simply be taught in another sense: Children develop empathy when it lives and breathes in their relationships, including their relationships with teachers. Yet large numbers of teachers, like Connie, struggle with stresses and angers and other challenges that can fray their ability to model empathy in their interactions with some children. Teachers, like other adults, can also naturally delight in certain children and find themselves consistently angry at or alienated by others.

At the same time, in a healthy school environment, adults display empathy and care not just for children, but for the wide range of adults in the school building, whether teachers, cafeteria workers, or custodians. Yet as with children, a variety of challenges can undermine adults' empathy for one another. Issues connected to the workplace or to race, religion, ethnicity, politics, class, or sexual orientation can make these relationships guarded or even hostile. Young teachers can find it challenging to empathize with veteran teachers, and vice versa. Teachers may have trouble empathizing with administrators who have power over them, and administers may be too busy to appreciate teachers' perspectives. These are not simple problems to solve. But minimally, when these problems become stressful and draining, it's important to create safe, productive spaces to discuss them.

Several concrete strategies can be useful for helping teachers express care in stressful conditions. Some adults, like Connie, might find it helpful to get into the practice of pausing and taking deep breaths

when a student provokes them; if possible, they might consult other adults before responding to students out of frustration. Teachers might benefit from brief meditations or other stress-reducing activities during the day. They also might engage in the circle of concern activity in which they consider which students and adults are inside and outside their circle. Brief surveys of teachers can also elicit useful information and create powerful platforms for reflection. (For surveys and a variety of other strategies, see Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

Worth the Effort

In this era of high-stakes accountability, schools are often loath to take on new responsibilities. But widening students' and adults' circle of concern is neither expensive nor burdensome, and it advances many education goals.

It boosts solidarity and morale and reduces burnout and stress. It makes schools places where more students want to learn and more teachers want to teach, supporting academic goals. It can help students develop an array of diverse relationships that can deeply enrich their lives. Above all, it is a path to creating students who will be wise and humane adults, who care about justice, and who are able at pivotal times to put the common good before their own. **EL**

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