

# Why Are Compassion and Empathy Important? Things for Adults to Think About

■ Compassion and empathy begin to develop in the very first years of life. Most scientists assume that we are biologically wired for these feelings, but we must recognize and nurture this natural inclination toward caring.

*Have you ever told a young child that your head hurts or that you've had a really bad day? Have children seen you cry? What happened? Do you agree that young children are naturally compassionate? How can we encourage this? How do we discourage it?*

■ Compassion and empathy encompass respect for all living things, even the tiniest of creatures that have no voice to speak for themselves.

*Is it okay to step on a snail? How is stepping on a snail different from pulling a dog's tail? How is pulling a dog's tail different from hitting someone?*

■ Television and movie violence are being blamed for creating an apathetic attitude about helping others within society. Children and adults are becoming jaded to scenes of violence that were at one time both shocking and sickening. As violence permeates our society, is our capacity for compassion diminishing?

*Watch television for several hours over a few days, and record the number of violent acts you see. Can you remember when violence had a more profound effect on you? Can you remember when graphic violence was not allowed on television? How do you feel about watching news reports of real violence, including war scenes, on television? Are your feelings different when the violence is real?*

# Talking With Children About Compassion and Empathy

Are compassion and empathy values worth keeping? Talk with children about the ideas below and see what they think.

- What does it mean to be kind to a friend? How does it feel when a friend is kind to you? What does it mean to be kind to animals?
- Think about a time when someone hurt you. What happened? How did you feel?
- With young children, say the Little Rabbit poem, making up hand motions to go along. Ask the children to describe how the rabbit feels. Why is he tired? Has he been running from a fox? Did something frighten him? The man understands how the little rabbit feels and wants to help him. Discuss the man's kindness.
- What do you think happens when you step on a worm or a bug? Do you realize that the worm will never eat again? Never crawl again? That its life is over? Everything has a job to do. If you kill it, it can't do its job.
- Brainstorm a list of all the things you need to do to take good care of a pet.
- Think of a time when you were hurt or sick. Who took care of you? How did that person take care of you? Have you helped take care of someone? Have you helped someone to feel better?

Develop children's language skills and continue your discussion of compassion and empathy by weaving the following vocabulary words into your day.

caring  
compassion  
empathy  
experiences

helping  
kindness  
thoughts  
feelings