

# Make This Summer About Building Empathy

It's officially summer and kids are out of school, so now what? For some parents, it's a rush to get their time filled with productive activities and structure. However, this may not be the best option if parents want to help kids develop empathy. According to parenting expert Michele Borba, author of *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*, kids who spend more time doing free play increase their ability to care for others, while kids who are overextended and stressed have limited capacity for empathy.



According to Borba, parents have great intentions in wanting to help their kids succeed by providing every opportunity, but kids also need downtime to play and engage with others through less structured activities. Additionally, Borba identifies excess stress in kids' lives as a factor to increased mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Today we live in a world of hyper-competitiveness. This fuels many of the choices that parents make to help increase their children's chances of success in highly competitive activities. Kids are gaining in skill and self-assurance but decreasing in their ability for empathy. But empathy is an extremely important trait that kids need to succeed. With better ability to empathize, kids gain increased ability to work and collaborate with others and communicate effectively. Borba indicates that "the capacity to care is an essential building block of these skills." She continues to point out that "kids develop it, in part, through unstructured, unsupervised free play."

As a child, summers seemed endless and magical. They revolved around a variety of free play activities including reading, board games, riding bikes, swimming, and exploring the neighborhood with friends. There are a number of factors that impede this type of summer relaxation. The world has become a more frightening place and parents don't feel safe allowing children to roam the neighborhood. Many parents' work schedules necessitate more scheduled, planned activities for kids. Children are more dependent on digital devices for entertainment.

Summer vacation simply isn't the same carefree experience that it used to be. However, Borba offers suggestions for building a more fun summer experiences to increase opportunities for empathy-building activities.

Parents can prioritize opportunities for letting their children play with friends. Borba recommends having these play dates be "unplugged." Playing with friends provides time for kids to develop social skills. These opportunities to allow kids to connect through play are as valuable experiences as the more structured activities that teach other skills. If need be, let some more structured options go in order to allow some time for your kids to have time for playing with friends.

Select summer camp experiences that emphasize fun activities. Some parents look at camp experiences as opportunities for an extension of the school environment. They look for camps with an academic edge. However, camps that promote activities such as swimming at the lake, arts and crafts, and singing around campfires promote more opportunities to develop social skills and create a more relaxed, stress-free atmosphere for kids.

Encourage more time away from electronics to help kids develop better social skills. Kids who primarily interact with others through online communication are less able to develop skills needed to navigate face-to-face social experiences. More real world interactions provide kids with opportunities to develop better social skills and emotional literacy, which helps to build their ability to develop empathy for others. If your kids are already over-reliant on digital communication, start to decrease their need by setting rules around certain activities where electronic devices are not allowed, such as mealtimes and family activities. Use these times to build more face-to-face interactions.

Schedule these family activities more regularly. Set aside times for activities such as family games and movie nights where you and your children get opportunities to have fun together. Focus on more cooperative games over competitive games, where family members need to work as a team. Use random decision making such as rock, paper, scissors or flipping a coin to help kids learn to resolve disputes amicably.

Kids need time to decompress, especially after a busier day. Have a physical place for kids to go to relax. Create a space with pillows, cushions, or a rocking chair where kids can just relax. Plan some quiet activities such as reading, journaling, listening to music, or art activities. Reading is particularly good activity to increase empathy. There is empirical evidence that people who read fiction increase their ability to see situations from another's point of view, which helps them increase ability to empathize with

the feelings of others. Audio books are an option for kids who avoid reading because it is a struggle.

Approach household chores as an expected part of being a member of the family. Make the workload a family event where everyone works together for the good of the whole family. Plan group rewards for the combined efforts rather than individual allowances to promote the notion being part of a group. Kids will learn that we sometimes need to put aside individual concerns to meet the needs of the whole group.

Use summer as an opportunity to help kids learn balance between play and work with an emphasis on activities that benefit others. The summer will be an opportunity to build empathy, increase value on social interactions, and promote family togetherness.

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