

empathy

Jesper Juul
Peter Høeg
Helle Jensen
Jes Bertelsen
Michael Stubberup
Steen Hildebrandt

empathy

it's what holds the world together

translated by Mark Kline

Empathy. It's what holds the world together

Titel of the Danish orginial version: Empati. Det der holder verden sammen

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Steen Hildebrandt

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1

The Foundation of Empathy

About this book

This book is a concise theoretical and practical guide on how to help people improve contact with themselves and each other.

Its authors met for the first time in 2007. We represent widely divergent professions, but we share an interest in the circumstances of children with regard to the rapid changes and drastic breakdown of values we all are currently experiencing, the great opportunities that are at hand. We met to come up with an answer to the question: what is the most important and most valuable thing that can be done today for children?

Since then we have met regularly. In addition to the ongoing dialog we maintain among ourselves, we've formed The Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children, which has held two conferences: in Århus (2007) and in Copenhagen (2009). We have participated in initiating trials in several primary schools, which have been documented among other places in two films, *This is how we do it in Elling School*, and *Calmness and Presence in the*

School, both of them produced and adapted by Marianne Rasmussen and Mette Bahnsen from Filmkompagniet; we have taken part in open public debate, held (and continue to hold on a regular basis) continuing education courses for preschool- and school teachers, and contributed to a special edition of the magazine "Cognition and Education"; and we have formed a collaboration with Denmark's University of Educational

Studies, VIA University College, and the Århus University research institution Interacting Minds.

This collaboration includes the instruction of children at several elementary schools and teachers' college teachers and students, based on the contents of this book, which is a summary of the experience fostered by our collaboration.

We believe that what children today need more than anything is support in developing self-accord.

Self-accord means a person is at peace at the core of their being, which is the only place from where a person can relate deeply to other people and to a complex world undergoing extreme transformation, a world in which it is difficult to find role models.

Empathy is one of the ways in which self-accord expresses itself when we are with others. We are all born with the aptitude for self-accord and empathy. These aptitudes can be developed and practiced. The first two sections of this book describe empathy in detail, while the third section deals with how it can be trained.

We have three specific groups of readers in mind. First, the book is for anyone with a serious interest in improving contact with themselves and others. By "serious" we mean a level of interest that includes a willingness to work at it, which a deepening of contact requires.

Second, the book is meant for those participating in the courses on empathy held by The Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children, where it will be used as the primary textbook.

Above all, however, what follows is intended for children. Not directly; the language employed is that of adults. But the theory that is explained has its central focus on children's circumstances, and all the exercises have been chosen especially for children.

We suggest and hope that adults will learn the exercises, and that after they understand and become familiar with them, they will teach them to children.

It's important to say that such an understanding and familiarity doesn't come easily. It can't be expected that deeper empathetic abilities can be achieved solely by reading, whether it be this book or any other, just as you can't learn to teach from reading a book.

Empathy is not something transmitted by the written word alone. Empathy is kindness, a sympathetic attitude, and understanding set into practice, it is quality, depth, and intensity in human contact. These things are best learned in an actual teaching situation, where teachers themselves have worked long and intensely at their own contact with others, so that through their behavior they actualize what is being taught. This book can inspire you. Which in itself can be valuable. But to move beyond inspiration you have to seek out an educational context. For the readers who may be interested in our work, we have included a section at the end about our organization, its history, and information about how to come into contact with us through its network.

This book contains three main sections. The first, "The Foundation of Empathy", describes the basis of human contact. In this section we make our case for how the better our contact with ourselves, the better and deeper becomes our understanding of others. And we argue that this heightening of contact can be trained.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise that this training is not directed toward learning something new, but at making us aware of what we already are able to do, which is what we call the "five innate abilities" – inborn talents or areas of talent closely connected with the feeling of joy of life.

Two short chapters then discuss why this suggested training is neither therapy nor self-development (which we have great respect for, by the way.) Therapy and self-development are the methods of working with our consciousness that we are best acquainted within our society, but they are seldom relevant for children, and therefore it is important to explain how they differ from what we propose.

The second main section, "Sustainability and Empathy," deals with how important it is that groups of people also develop empathy. How global crises also are crises in mutual international understanding, and how their solutions require better interpersonal relations.

In the same manner, sustainability requires not only an outer, material balance in ecosystems, but also has need of a personal equilibrium and corresponding inner sustainability that assures we don't over-exploit our inner life.

We move out of the global perspective and zoom in on the Danish family and primary school, both with regard to the enormous problems they face and the unique opportunities we believe exist at this time. The conclusion these chapters point to is as mentioned: that more than anything, what is needed for children as well as adults is self-accord. And this is something that can be trained.

The third section, "Training Empathy," deals with just that – training. Exercises to develop the aforementioned natural skills are explained.

Further examples of how to present the exercises to children are found in the appendix, in addition to how to make the exercises dynamic and how outdoor life creates special opportunities for this educational practice.

What follows is written in adult-level language. But it's written with children in mind, in two ways. First and foremost because we believe and have experienced that it is possible to help children enter adult life in a better way than it so often happens. This process is one of this book's projects. At the same time, it also is meant to speak to the child in us all. Every single adult who moves toward greater self-accord and a better feel for their fellow human beings also, without exception, strengthens their contact to the direct and spontaneous happiness that comes naturally to a normal child, to all of us. A happiness we can achieve again, not as a step backwards toward childhood, but as an unfurling of potential, with our adult bodies and mature consciousness to revive the child inside us.

We would like to thank those who have helped us with this book. Hanne Jacobsen and Bjørn Winther, who have done a great deal of the teaching in the courses set up by The Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children and have contributed to parts of the exercise appendix.

Martin Fasting, who illustrated the exercises. Renée Toft Simonsen, Katinka Götzsche, Anders Laugesen, and Matias Ignatius, whose writings and conversations have inspired us in connection with our work in the society. And Henriette Due and Birgitte Prahm, for formulating the exercises used in primary schools that come from their many years of experience with them.

Finally, a personal note: we, the authors of this book, have various but professionally specific knowledge about aspects of the lives, nature, and circumstances of children. And we all are parents. But naturally we aren't perfect in our relations, whether with children or adults. Our impression is that we make and have made the same mistakes as everyone else. What has brought us together is, among other things, that we want to learn from our mistakes so they are fewer and farther in between.

What we already are able to do

You could call this a handbook. What follows, however, differs from most other handbooks in one essential way: it's not about learning anything new. It's about discovering something we already are able to do.

That may sound paradoxical, because page after page of argumentation follows that you hopefully will read and understand, page after page of exercises you hopefully will perform and benefit from. But it's vital to emphasize that the method and attitudes we describe basically are not meant to provide new knowledge or skills to children or adults.

This will later be elaborated on. For the moment, to shortly explain this important matter, two examples from areas most people know something about are relaxation techniques and working with creativity.

A prerequisite for being in contact with ourselves and others is that our bodies are somewhat relaxed. In nearly all the exercises in this book, physical relaxation is an important component. But laxation is first and foremost a spontaneous process, a natural state. Anyone who has held a baby close has experienced its deep, trustful state of relaxation. And our mature, much more vigilant and tense bodies are constantly trying to recover the balance we rob them of. Most, perhaps even all of us have to train systematically every day to recapture a physical state of relaxation and well-being that is comparable to what we had as children. Knowledge and ability can help along the way, but the goal is that state itself, which we are born to be able to achieve.

Another example is play and creativity. All children play, and if they are prevented from playing it will adversely affect their development. Children's play is one way to express innate, spontaneous creativity. Adults also need to express themselves creatively. We know from artists' descriptions of their work processes, and from areas in which adults attempt to tap into their inventiveness, how our consciousness is confronted by judgmental, assessing voices that have been internalized mentally and physically while growing up. These voices block us from opening up to the stream of ideas that is the sole source of art, invention, research, and innovation of every kind. But when this stream opens anyway, it doesn't seem as if it's something we've acquired; it's more that we've reestablished a connection to a natural potential in ourselves, and that we've allowed it to blossom.

These two examples may seem obvious, but they are important. Experience has shown us that our attitude when entering into the educational system this book promotes is important. If it is understood that the foundation of empathy in practice (as something we do, a way to live our lives) is already established and, in a sense, complete, it is then demystified. So with the attitude that our hearts and minds already carry what is necessary – or at least its seed – we can start out by already being on the road to self-accord.

In this way our relationship to the teaching of empathy we receive, whether from this book or, preferably, from a person, smacks of equality from the very beginning. Because the situation at the outset isn't that the teacher is to give us something we lack, but that she or he only has to support us in developing what we already possess.

Another important effect of this trust of our own capabilities is the improved ability to follow our progress as we begin training. Progress becomes evident not only in the way we're accustomed to when learning something new, such as new skills or understanding. To begin with, progress often comes as vague perceptions that we're trusting ourselves as well as others more, that instead of going somewhere new we're coming home to ourselves.

Training joy of life

Empathy and joy of life are closely connected. For most of us, deep and intense moments of happiness are often, if not always, tied to deep and intense contact with others.

Training our empathetic abilities is therefore also training joy of life.

The idea that life proficiency and joy of life are things that can be trained is foreign to our culture, which in a way is strange. Our entire western civilization is largely one long testimonial on what can be accomplished with practice. Nowhere else in the world is there as great (and justified) a faith in human beings' potential through training to change their own existence as in the western world of the past five hundred years.

This means that even the youngest children in school are mentally nuanced in a way children never before have been. From kindergarten class and onward they are presented with methods for language analysis, mathematical and economic comprehension, a beginning knowledge of how to argue logically, how to tell time

and navigate in traffic, and on the whole an enormous number of valuable and necessary things that in time will guide them toward adult life.

But they don't encounter a comparably exact and deep knowledge of what it takes to understand another human being, the nuances in the

emotions of the heart. How empathetic emotions differ from emotions concerning delimitation and self-assertion. What the relationship is between body awareness, ability to concentrate, presence, and kindness.

That they aren't exposed to these things is of course because this knowledge isn't widespread throughout our culture.

There are many reasons for this. We would like to point out one of the essential ones. Enlightened education – that is, the opportunity for acquiring knowledge and proficiencies free from religious beliefs and political dogma – goes slower than what you might think. The Danish primary school can be said to have its roots in the 1700's Enlightenment, where the liberation of art, science, and politics from the Church and the feudal monarchy began. You would think that this freeing up of knowledge is complete, at least in our part of the world. That all knowledge is now accessible. We don't believe this to be the case. In our eyes, our culture has yet to deal with the fundamental prerequisites for human fellowship. That is, with empathy and solidarity.

There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that the Danish National Evangelical Lutheran Church, the state religion, is based on the belief of Martin Luther that humans are born evil and there is nothing they themselves can do about this unfortunate situation. Should they anyway try, they only make matters worse (these depressing thoughts are clearly articulated in what Luther considered one of his major works, *On the Bondage of the Will*). In all of Protestant northern Europe, therefore, the church has traditionally been against all forms of inner training and, until modern times, psychology in general.