

## Views from VanDeWalle

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### Empathy Has Power

A couple of weeks ago, I was fortunate to teach 10 middle school youth a leadership curriculum that included topics such as active listening, making introductions, utilizing their strengths, and how effective leaders and teams use synergy and empathy. There was a great video I shared with the youth titled, "Empathy Can Change the World." It was a powerful video as it illustrated the power of having compassion for others. So this week, I thought I'd share how empathy can have long-lasting, positive impacts.

Empathy can often be confused with sympathy. Sympathy is a feeling of concern for someone who is going through something difficult, while empathy is the ability to share in someone's emotional experience. Sympathy is more cognitive and involves keeping some distance, while empathy is more emotional and requires putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Helen Riess, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, points out that, "The ability to connect empathically with others—to feel with them, to care about their well-being, and to act with compassion—is critical to our lives, helping us to get along, work more effectively, and thrive as a society."

Empathy relies on specific parts of the brain that enable an emotional connection with others and provide us with the motivation to care. Some people can absorb another's pain or emotions and genuinely care for a person. People who have a difficult time expressing empathy usually desire to preserve their own well-being and focus on carrying on with their own lives. Riess describes other instances where empathy is crucial—for example, when we encounter people who are different from us, when we ourselves have made a mistake and need self-empathy, in our workplaces, and even within government.

For people who do not naturally possess empathy, it can be learned. In fact, the educational sector has curricula and lessons teaching youth how to be more empathetic. Literature shows many benefits of empathy in education, including building a positive classroom culture, strengthening community, and preparing students to be leaders in their own communities. Developing an empathetic classroom involves creating an environment where youth feel safe and secure, ensuring consistency and predictability, and helping youth practice self-regulation skills. Relationships matter. Help kids build relationships that inspire them to trust and care for others.

In conclusion, students who are empathetic are more cooperative in class, have better relationships with their teachers, and are more engaged in school. Increased empathy can decrease bullying and aggression among kids and make them kinder and

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more inclusive toward classmates. More empathetic children are more likely to show prosocial behavior, such as sharing, helping, and comforting others.

To end this article, I will use a quote from Helen Riess: "We have hope to help shape a more civil society, respectful discourse, understanding of others, and a humane world."