

Invited Column
Developing Empathy: Changing the World Through Reading

Christy Moore
Taylor University

Reading and discussing children’s literature can develop the deepest form of comprehension: empathy. Empathy has the power to transform our readers and the communities they live in. It can be taught at early ages, even with our primary students, and is an authentic way to approach social and emotional learning.

Benefits of Read Alouds

According to multiple studies compiled by author and educator Emily Anderson (2022), the benefits of being read to are staggering. When read to, students build vocabulary, improve their comprehension and listening skills, reduce stress, strengthen fluency, and improve their working memory. When the discussion component is added, it allows students to also consider multiple perspectives, ethics, and morals; share feelings and strategies; and build relationships and **empathy**. Time spent reading to students is never time wasted.

Developing Empathy

Many experts, including Ellin Oliver Keene (2012), describe empathy as the deepest form of comprehension. Many of us can sympathize with others, but is that enough? Sympathy is to see someone’s pain but to remain in our own place of comfort. Empathy, however, is feeling with that person and walking alongside and, in turn, connecting with them on a deeper level. In *Choice Words*, Peter H. Johnston (2004) relays a conversation he had with a first-year teacher who naively stated, “asking myself from time to time if it might be possible to teach English in such a way that people would stop killing each other.” This thought struck me as impossible. But could experiencing difficult situations through the eyes of a character in a good book prepare our students to act with empathy and self-regulation in the future? Would the development of empathy prepare our students for life decisions that they may face?

These life decisions could be as common as how to act when someone says something unkind, when we have differing opinions, or when we can’t find our favorite sneakers. They could also be more difficult life decisions such as, do we lie, steal, or hurt someone in order to survive? I experienced this myself as I read *See You at Harry’s* by Jo Knowles. I wept as I read this book in my backyard swimming pool on Labor Day 2015. This fictional account walked through a family’s response to the tragic death of a son and brother. The mother in this book grieved in private after losing one of her children while ignoring the rest of her grieving family, which ultimately damaged relationships. Little did I know that just one month later, I would lose my own sweet son suddenly, without warning. But because I had experienced this situation through the characters in this book, I was able to better navigate the long painful road of grief. In my situation, I chose to react the opposite of the mother character and I clung to my family who supported each other through this tragedy.

How Do We Get Started?

How do we go about teaching empathy and other social emotional competencies in our classrooms? Educator and author Maria Nichols (2019) describes this process in *Building Bigger Ideas: A Process for Teaching Purposeful Talk*. With the ever-increasing amount of communication through technology, our students need to develop the ability to discuss ideas and issues face to face. They need to be able to listen with the intent to build deeper ideas. Here they can wrestle with multiple perspectives by respectfully agreeing, disagreeing, and adding to one another’s ideas. Dorn and Soffos (2006) lay out some steps to having deep conversations with students and developing empathy. After synthesizing these ideas, I developed the basic list below to start these deep conversations around literature. Choose great books where characters change and grow. See below for recommendations:

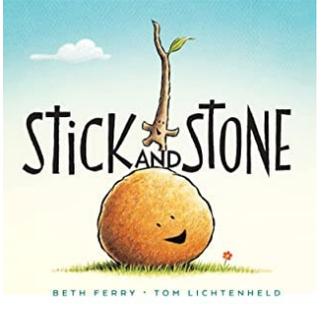
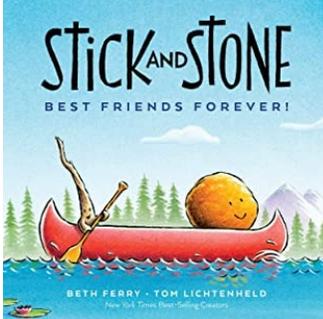
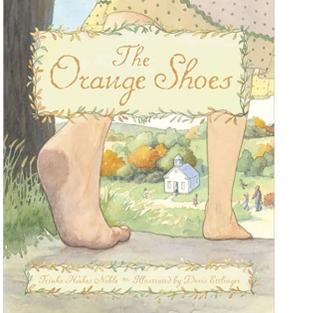
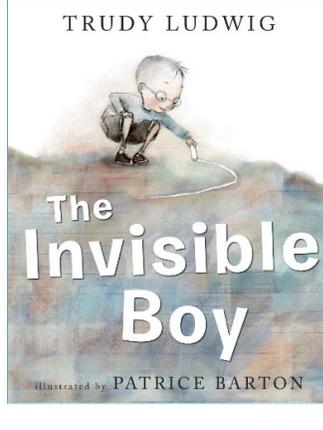
1. Read aloud with students **daily** with prosody and fluency.
2. After the read aloud, sit in a circle and discuss the meaning of the book and discover life lessons.
3. Teach students to make eye contact and listen with the intent to understand and build ideas.
4. Model the language of dialogue including agreeing and disagreeing with evidence. Use open-ended and higher-level questions such as: What are you thinking or wondering? What did you learn? Would you want to be this character’s friend? Why or why not? How will you live your life differently because you have read this book?

Conclusion

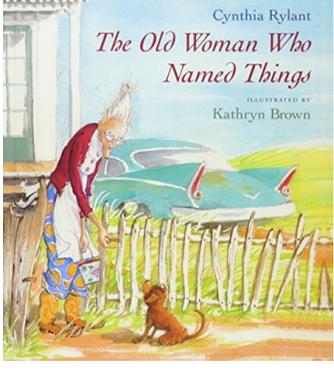
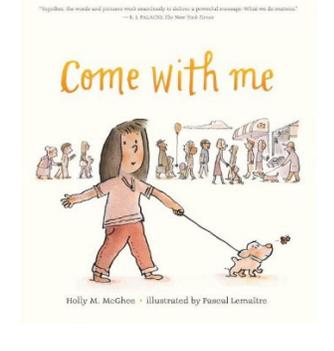
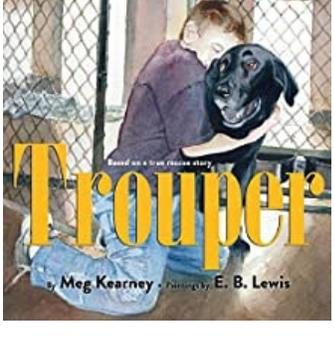
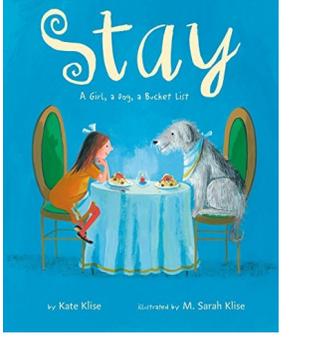
There is no denying that many of our students are struggling with the development of social and emotional competencies after enduring the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the time to use our instructional time and resources to address the building of these needed assets. Developing these SEL skills, especially empathy, could potentially change the world for our students and give all of us new possibilities.

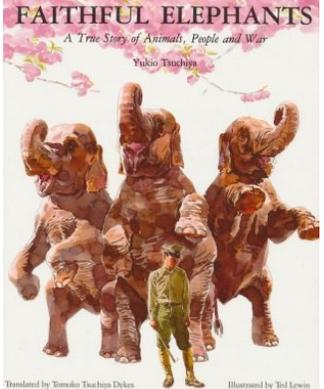
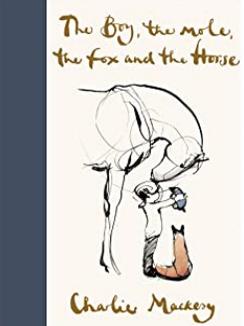
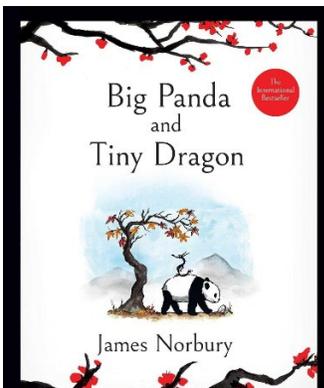
Book Recommendations for Teaching Empathy

Book	Author/Title/Publisher	Age Range	SEL Lessons that Develop the Ability to:
	O'Neill, A., & Huliska-Beith, L. (2002). <i>The Recess Queen</i> . Scholastic.	4–8-year-olds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - See other perspectives - Listen and communicate - Resolve conflict - Respect others - Understand feelings of others - Build healthy relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy

	<p>Ferry, B., & Lichtenheld, T. (2017). <i>Stick and stone</i>. Clarion Books.</p>	<p>3–8-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build friendships - Think critically - Self-regulate - Collaborate with others - Act with resilience - Feel and demonstrate empathy
	<p>Ferry, B., & Lichtenheld, T. (2021). <i>Stick and stone: Best friends forever!</i> Clarion Books.</p>	<p>3–8-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build perseverance - Recognize and express emotions - Change your behavior - Forgive others - Create a sense of belonging - Achieve positive goals - Feel and demonstrate empathy
	<p>Noble, T. H., & Ettlinger, D. (2013). <i>The Orange Shoes</i>. Zaner-Bloser.</p>	<p>6–12-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be content with what you have - Act with resilience - Understand feelings of others - Overcome obstacles - Understand your strengths - Feel and demonstrate empathy
	<p>Ludwig, T., & Barton, P. (2013). <i>The Invisible Boy</i>. Alfred A. Knopf.</p>	<p>5–10-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand and manage emotions - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Understand your strengths - Understand feelings of others - Self-regulate - Consider multiple perspectives - Collaborate

	<p>Laminack, L. L., & Cole, H. (2014). <i>Three Hens and a Peacock</i>. CNIB.</p>	<p>4–10-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Understand your strengths - Connect and collaborate - Understand feelings of others - Consider multiple perspectives - Network to achieve goals
	<p>Laminack, L. L., & Cole, H. (2023). <i>Three Hens, a Peacock, and the Enormous Egg</i>. Margaret Quinlin Books.</p>	<p>4–10-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problem solve in collaboration - Demonstrate self-confidence - Inquire - Consider multiple perspectives - Understand your strengths - Self-regulate - Care for others' needs - Communicate clearly - Feel and demonstrate empathy
	<p>Santat, D. (2017). <i>After the Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again</i>. Roaring Brook Press.</p>	<p>4–10-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be resilient - Demonstrate growth mindset - Awareness of own strengths - Understand and manage emotions - Show initiative - Self-regulate - Feel and demonstrate empathy
	<p>Laminack, L. L., & Soentpiet, C. K. (2023). <i>Saturdays and Teacakes</i>. Peachtree.</p>	<p>4–10-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demonstrate integrity - Maintain positive relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Demonstrate work ethic

 <p>Cynthia Rylant <i>The Old Woman Who Named Things</i> ILLUSTRATED BY Kathryn Brown</p>	<p>Rylant, C., & Brown, K. (2000). <i>The Old Woman Who Named Things</i>. Voyager Books.</p>	<p>5-year-olds - adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build and maintain relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Understand and manage emotions - Show initiative - Self-regulate - Care for others
 <p>"Perhaps, the world and picture most accurately to deliver a powerful message: What we do matters." —K. J. PHILLIPS (The New York Times)</p> <p><i>Come with me</i></p> <p>Holly M. McGhee • Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître</p>	<p>McGhee, H. M., & Lemaître, P. (2017). <i>Come With Me</i>. G. P. Putnam's Sons.</p>	<p>5-year-olds - adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand and manage emotions - Show initiative - Self-regulate - Care for others - Build positive relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset
 <p>Based on a true rescue story</p> <p><i>Trouper</i></p> <p>by Meg Kearney • Illustrated by E. B. Lewis</p>	<p>Kearney, M., & Lewis, E. B. (2015). <i>Trouper</i>. CNIB.</p>	<p>5-year-olds - adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider multiple perspectives - Show initiative - Self-regulate - Care for others - Build positive relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset
 <p><i>Stay</i></p> <p>A Girl, a Dog, a Bucket List</p> <p>by Kate Klise • Illustrated by M. Sarah Klise</p>	<p>Klise, K., & Klise, M. S. (2017). <i>Stay: A Girl, a Dog, a Bucket List</i>. Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.</p>	<p>4–12-year-olds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Understand and manage emotions - Care for the needs of others - Problem solve to reach goal

	<p>Tsuchiya, Y. (1988). <i>Faithful Elephants</i>. Houghton Mifflin.</p>	<p>10-year-olds - adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider multiple perspectives - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Understand feelings of others - Prioritize
	<p>Yamada, K., & Hurst, E. (2021). <i>Trying</i>. Compendium Inc.</p>	<p>All Ages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Understand and manage emotions - Consider multiple perspectives - Show initiative - Self-regulate - Demonstrate persistence - Set positive goals - Problem solve
	<p>Mackesy, C. (2019). <i>The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse</i>. Ebury Press.</p>	<p>All Ages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Care for others - Create a sense of belongingness - Consider multiple perspectives - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Understand and manage emotions - Trust
	<p>Norbury, J. (2021). <i>Big panda and tiny dragon</i>. Michael Joseph.</p>	<p>All Ages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-regulate - Care for others - Build positive relationships - Feel and demonstrate empathy - Demonstrate growth mindset - Overcome obstacles - Be content - Be grateful - Collaborate

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Author Information

Christy Moore teaches emergent and early literacy courses along with intro to early childhood and cultural diversity at Taylor University, Upland, IN. She presents at various state and national literacy conferences and provides professional development for elementary teachers. She is passionate about developing empathy within students of any age through meaningful books and discussions. Contact Christy at: christy_moore@taylor.edu