

Empathic

sensing the thoughts, feelings and experiences of others

- targeted
- adaptable
- Primary
- Intermediate
- Middle
- Senior

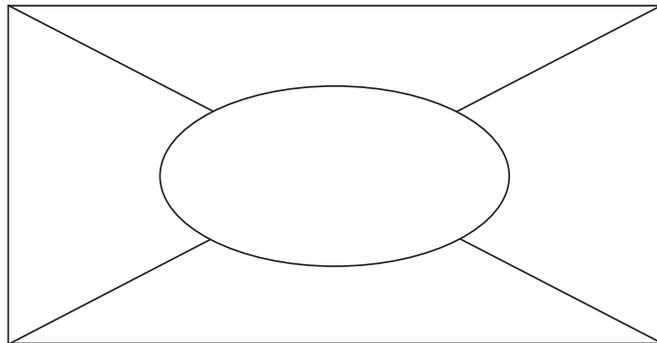
Introduce the term

- Objectives:**
- recognize the attributes of someone who is empathic;
 - appreciate the value of being empathic;
 - learn to use strategies to enhance one’s empathy.

Use the following activities to introduce the concept of empathy

- Write the following quote on the board. Explain to students that this is advice given by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“If you just learn a single trick...you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his [or her] point of view...until you climb inside of his [or her] skin and walk around in it.”
(Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, New York: Grand Central, 1960, 39.)
- Invite students to discuss the significance of this quote by participating in a placemat activity. Organize students in groups of four and provide each group with an 11x17 piece of paper (placemat) divided as illustrated. Provide the following questions and instruct students to write a response in their section of the placemat. Students then discuss their ideas and record their group response in the centre of the placemat.



- What does Atticus mean by “climb inside” someone’s skin?
- How would you do this?
- How does this help you understand someone?
- Why does Atticus say that you will get along better with “all kinds of folks”?
- Introduce the term “empathy”. Encourage students to explain the term’s meaning in their own words. Refer to the literal meaning of empathy: *“the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner”* (Miriam-Webster’s online Dictionary).
- Invite students to suggest other words that have a similar meaning to empathy. Establish the difference between “empathy” (sensing someone’s feelings) and “sympathy” (feeling sorry for someone). Show students the photo of the young woman and child available at <http://tc2.ca/index.php?page=online-photo-gallery> (click on the “Describe” tab).



Introduce the attributes of the concept

- Discuss with students the feelings the image evokes. Students may say that the image makes them feel sad or sorry for the girl, or that they want to help her. Point out that these are feelings of sympathy rather than empathy. Ask students what would help them feel empathic toward this person so that they would be able to imagine her feelings, thoughts and experiences. Suggestions may include: understanding more about the girl's situation, having a similar experience, or personal interest in the situation.
- Introduce the terms “empathic” and “empathetic” as interchangeable adjectives describing someone who demonstrates empathy.
- Using the activities that follow, introduce three basic attributes of empathic:
 - 1) Individuals who are empathic are sincerely interested in understanding the feelings of others.
 - 2) Individuals who are empathic will use direct and indirect clues to imagine what others are experiencing, thinking, and feeling.
 - 3) Individuals who are empathic are inclined to act sensitively towards others.

Introduce attribute #1

Attribute #1: Individuals who are empathic are sincerely interested in understanding the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others.

- Invite students to discuss when and why being empathic might be important. Encourage students to think of situations in their personal life, home life, classroom life, community life, and life as a global citizen. As students share their ideas, create a web or chart on the board.
- Invite students to write or share a personal anecdote. Ask students to think of a situation in which someone understood their thoughts and feelings or a situation where they wished someone had understood their thoughts and feelings.
- Write attribute #1 on the board, replacing the word “sincerely” with a blank space. (*Individuals who are empathic are _____ interested in understanding the feelings of others.*) Invite students to brainstorm words that might complete the statement. Suggestions may include: really, always, genuinely, sincerely, sometimes, casually, often, or curiously. With younger students provide a list of possible suggestions. Invite students to work in pairs to select the best word to powerfully complete the attribute. Suggest to students that people who are empathic sincerely or genuinely attempt to understand others.
- Discuss with students why it is sometimes difficult to feel empathic. Suggestions may include: thinking only about our own feelings, having limited information, trying to understand a response you don't agree with, trying to understand something that is far from our own experience.
- **Extension:** Present students with several photographs or newspaper headlines that represent a current or historic controversial issue. Suitable images can be found by typing “images that changed the world” into an online search engine (e.g. Google).
- Invite students to read the headline or look at the image with a partner and discuss:
 - Which of the situations depicted makes you feel most empathic?
 - Who might you be empathic toward?
 - Why should we care about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those represented in the photos?
 - How would empathy (for either side) change the way you view this issue?

Introduce attribute #2

Attribute #2: Individuals who are empathic will use direct and indirect clues to imagine what others are experiencing, thinking, and feeling.

- Point out to students that the definition of empathic indicates understanding another’s thoughts and feelings without a detailed explanation. Ask students how it is possible to detect others’ thoughts and feelings without an obvious explanation. Invite students to suggest direct and indirect clues that might help uncover what another is thinking, feeling, and experiencing.
 - **Direct clues** might include: body posture, facial expressions, physical gestures, appearance, statements, tone of voice.
 - **Indirect clues** might include: a person’s past history, their role or position in a situation, what a person does not say or do in a situation.
- Refer back to the image used in the introductory activity. Invite students to look carefully for clues about the woman’s thoughts and feelings. For example, her look of determination may indicate that she is afraid for her child’s safety. As a class, identify details that provide clues to the woman’s experience. Encourage students to consider elements such as physical stance and facial expressions.

- Point out to students that it may be easier to be empathic when we actually see someone in person rather than looking at an image. Provide pairs of students with copies of *Scenarios* (Activity Sheet A). Invite students to role play scenarios communicating thoughts and feelings to the audience. Provide the following instructions to students:

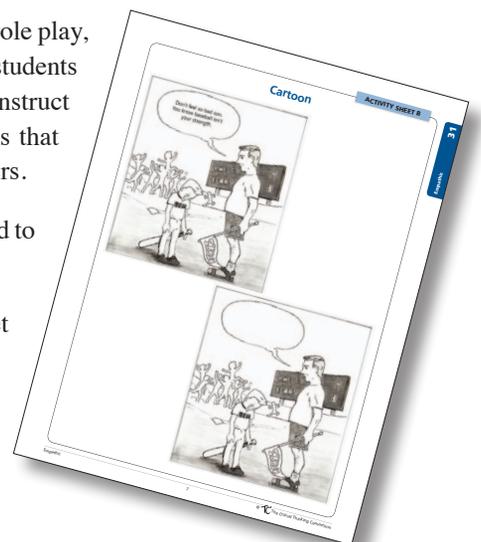
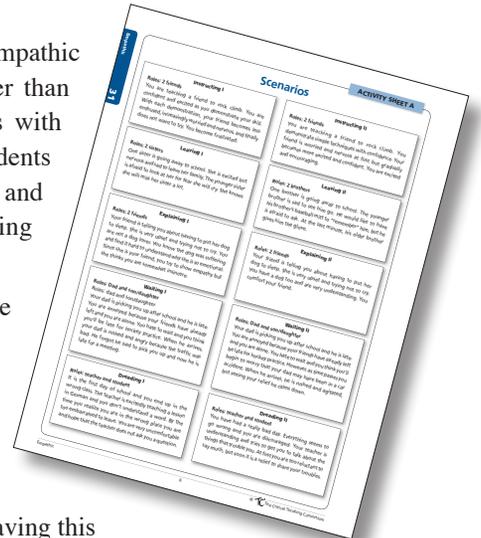
- Select a scenario and determine which of the two roles you will take.
- Decide together how you will convey the situation of your role-play quickly to your audience. The first line you say should let the audience know **who** you are, **what** your relationship to your partner is, **why** you are having this interaction, and **where** you are.
- Decide on the direct and indirect clues you will provide during your role play to show (not tell) the audience your feelings.

- After students have prepared and practiced their role play, combine three or four pairs into one group. Invite students to present their role play within their group and instruct the audience to identify direct and indirect clues that reveal the thoughts and feelings of the role players.

Introduce attribute #3

Attribute #3: Individuals who are empathic are inclined to act sensitively towards others.

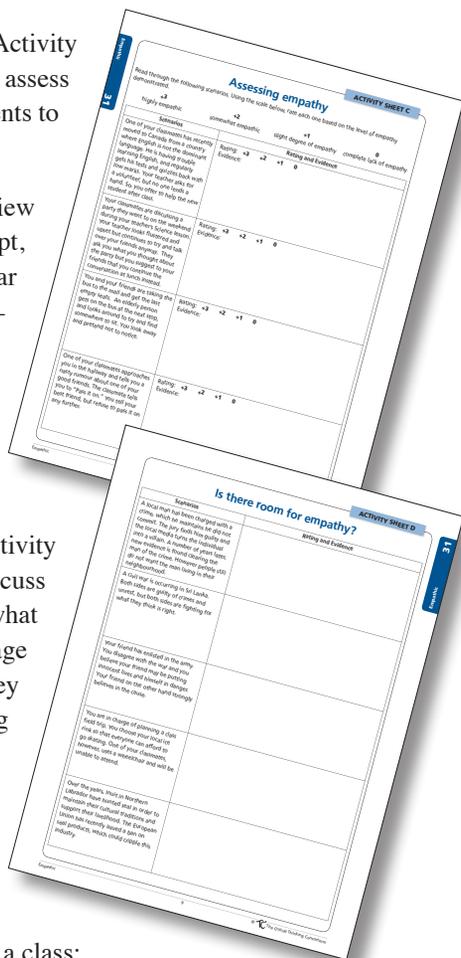
- Show students a copy of *Cartoon* (Activity Sheet B) and ask them how they would rate this father’s empathic response. Encourage students to support their decision with evidence. Ask students to consider the second cartoon and suggest a response from the father that shows empathy.



Reinforce
the concept

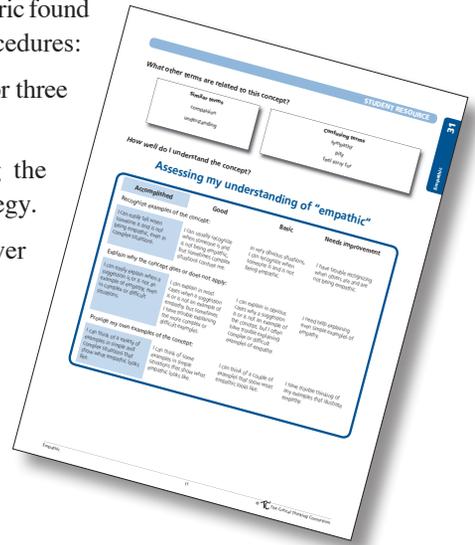
- Write attribute #3 on the board and discuss with students the influence empathy might have on our interactions with others.
- Provide students with a copy of *Assessing empathy* (Activity Sheet C). Invite students to read each scenario and assess the level of empathy demonstrated. Encourage students to provide evidence for their judgments.
- Introduce the Student Resource, *Empathic*. Review each of the elements: the key attributes of the concept, reasons for developing empathic attributes, similar and potentially confusing terminology, and the self-assessment rubric. Help students create their own examples for each attribute by asking them to recall a time when they or someone they know acted in this way. Encourage students to refer to this resource when using the concept in the future.
- Distribute a copy of *Is there room for empathy?* (Activity Sheet D) to each student. Instruct students to discuss each scenario in groups of two or three and identify what empathy might look like in each situation. Encourage students to consider who might be empathic, who they would show empathy for, and what difference showing empathy would have on the scenario. Remind students to demonstrate the attributes of empathy in their responses. If students think there is no room for empathy in the situation, invite them to explain why.
- Invite students to discuss the following questions as a class:
 - Can you be empathic and still apply an appropriate consequence to an act of wrongdoing? (For example, should a judge be empathic?)
 - Would there be any situation where being empathic would be inappropriate?
- At appropriate times over the ensuing weeks, ask students to use this concept in regular classroom situations, including the following:
 - Understanding the experiences of others in historical contexts
 - Understanding the experiences of characters in literature
 - Deciding how to solve social problems
 - Understanding current or historic political events
 - Examining global events
 - Anticipating the consequences for others of your decisions
 - Acting sensitively toward others

Apply the concept in
everyday teaching



Assess student understanding

- Student responses can be evaluated using the rubric found in the Student Resource and the following procedures:
 - Allow students to practise the strategy two or three times without evaluation.
 - Guide students in interpreting and using the rubric to evaluate their own use of the strategy.
 - Encourage students to use the rubric whenever they use the strategy.



Scenarios

Instructing I

Roles: 2 friends

You are teaching a friend to rock climb. You are confident and excited as you demonstrate your skill. With each demonstration, your friend becomes less enthused, increasingly worried and nervous, and finally does not want to try. You become frustrated.

Instructing II

Roles: 2 friends

You are teaching a friend to rock climb. You demonstrate simple techniques with confidence. Your friend is worried and nervous at first but gradually becomes more excited and confident. You are excited and encouraging.

Leaving I

Roles: 2 sisters

One sister is going away to school. She is excited but nervous and sad to leave her family. The younger sister is afraid to look at her for fear she will cry. She knows she will miss her sister a lot.

Leaving II

Roles: 2 brothers

One brother is going away to school. The younger brother is sad to see him go. He would like to have his brother's baseball mitt to "remember" him, but he is afraid to ask. At the last minute, his older brother gives him the glove.

Explaining I

Roles: 2 friends

Your friend is telling you about having to put her dog to sleep. She is very upset and trying not to cry. You are not a dog lover. You know the dog was suffering and find it hard to understand why she is so emotional. Since she is your friend, you try to show empathy but she thinks you are somewhat insincere.

Explaining II

Roles: 2 friends

Your friend is telling you about having to put her dog to sleep. She is very upset and trying not to cry. You have a dog too and are very understanding. You comfort your friend.

Waiting I

Roles: Dad and son/daughter

Your dad is picking you up after school and he is late. You are annoyed because your friends have already left and you are alone. You hate to wait and you think you'll be late for hockey practice. When he arrives, your dad is rushed and angry because the traffic was bad. He forgot he had to pick you up and now he is late for a meeting.

Waiting II

Roles: Dad and son/daughter

Your dad is picking you up after school and he is late. You are annoyed because your friends have already left and you are alone. You hate to wait and you think you'll be late for hockey practice. However, as time passes you begin to worry that your dad may have been in a car accident. When he arrives, he is rushed and agitated, but seeing your relief he calms down.

Dreading I

Roles: teacher and student

It is the first day of school and you end up in the wrong class. The teacher is excitedly teaching a lesson in German and you don't understand a word. By the time you realize you are in the wrong place you are too embarrassed to leave. You are very uncomfortable and hope that the teacher does not ask you a question.

Dreading II

Roles: teacher and student

You have had a really bad day. Everything seems to go wrong and you are discouraged. Your teacher is understanding and tries to get you to talk about the things that trouble you. At first you are too reluctant to say much, but soon it is a relief to share your troubles.

Cartoon



Assessing empathy

Read through the following scenarios. Using the scale below, rate each one based on the level of empathy demonstrated.

+3
highly empathic
+2
somewhat empathic
+1
slight degree of empathy
0
complete lack of empathy

Scenarios	Rating and Evidence
<p>One of your classmates has recently moved to Canada from a country where English is not the dominant language. He is having trouble learning English, and regularly gets his tests and quizzes back with low marks. Your teacher asks for a volunteer, but no one lends a hand. So, you offer to help the new student after class.</p>	<p>Rating: +3 +2 +1 0 Evidence:</p>
<p>Your classmates are discussing a party they went to on the weekend during your teacher's Science lesson. Your teacher looks flustered and upset but continues to try and talk over your friends anyway. They ask you what you thought about the party but you suggest to your friends that you continue the conversation at lunch instead.</p>	<p>Rating: +3 +2 +1 0 Evidence:</p>
<p>You and your friends are taking the bus to the mall and get the last empty seats. An elderly person gets on the bus at the next stop, and looks around to try and find somewhere to sit. You look away and pretend not to notice.</p>	<p>Rating: +3 +2 +1 0 Evidence:</p>
<p>One of your classmates approaches you in the hallway and tells you a nasty rumour about one of your good friends. The classmate tells you to "Pass it on." You tell your best friend, but refuse to pass it on any further.</p>	<p>Rating: +3 +2 +1 0 Evidence:</p>

Is there room for empathy?

Scenarios	Rating and Evidence
<p>A local man has been charged with a crime, which he maintains he did not commit. The jury finds him guilty and the local media turns the individual into a villain. A number of years later, new evidence is found clearing the man of the crime. However people still do not want the man living in their neighbourhood.</p>	
<p>A civil war is occurring in Sri Lanka. Both sides are guilty of crimes and unrest, but both sides are fighting for what they think is right.</p>	
<p>Your friend has enlisted in the army. You disagree with the war and you believe your friend may be putting innocent lives and himself in danger. Your friend on the other hand strongly believes in the cause.</p>	
<p>You are in charge of planning a class field trip. You choose your local ice rink so that everyone can afford to go skating. One of your classmates, however, uses a wheelchair and will be unable to attend.</p>	
<p>Over the years, Inuit in Northern Labrador have hunted seal in order to maintain their cultural traditions and support their livelihood. The European Union has recently issued a ban on seal products, which could cripple this industry.</p>	

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What are the key attributes or features of empathy?

#1: Individuals who are empathic are sincerely interested in understanding others.

EXAMPLE: When I heard the news story of a boy setting himself on fire, I wondered what had happened in his life to cause him to do this.

My own example:

#2: Individuals who are empathic will use direct and indirect clues to imagine what others are experiencing, thinking, and feeling.

EXAMPLE: My friend agreed to lend me her new bike but I could tell by her hesitation that she really wasn't comfortable.

My own example:

#3: Individuals who are empathic are inclined to act sensitively towards others.

EXAMPLE: When I hear the Republic of Maldives will be underwater due to rising sea levels, it makes me want to do something about global warming.

My own example:

Why is developing the attributes of empathy important?

- **Develop a deeper understanding:**

Examining events through someone else's experience helps me more deeply understand the impact of decisions and broadens my worldview.

My own example:

- **Resolve conflicts:**

Understanding someone else's experience helps me consider solutions that can meet everyone's needs.

My own example:

- **Foster global citizenship:**

Understanding the feelings of others helps me consider my responsibilities beyond my immediate situation.

My own example:

What other terms are related to this concept?**Similar terms**

compassion
understanding

Confusing terms

sympathy
pity
feel sorry for

How well do I understand the concept?**Assessing my understanding of “empathic”****Accomplished****Good****Basic****Needs improvement****Recognize examples of the concept:**

I can easily tell when someone is and is not being empathic, even in complex situations.

I can usually recognize when someone is and is not being empathic, but sometimes complex situations confuse me.

In very obvious situations, I can recognize when someone is and is not being empathic.

I have trouble recognizing when others are and are not being empathic.

Explain why the concept does or does not apply:

I can easily explain when a suggestion is or is not an example of empathy, even in complex or difficult situations.

I can explain in most cases when a suggestion is or is not an example of empathy, but sometimes I have trouble explaining the more complex or difficult examples.

I can explain in obvious cases why a suggestion is or is not an example of the concept, but I often have trouble explaining complex or difficult examples of empathy.

I need help explaining even simple examples of empathy.

Provide my own examples of the concept:

I can think of a variety of examples in simple and complex situations that show what empathic looks like.

I can think of some examples in simple situations that show what empathic looks like.

I can think of a couple of examples that show what empathic looks like.

I have trouble thinking of any examples that illustrate empathy.