

## Teaching Empathy to Young Children or Why “Tell Him You’re Sorry” Isn’t the Answer

by Jean Oxton

Ahh, it’s another day of co-oping in the backyard at Trinity House. Things seem to be going smoothly...sand toys are scattered in the sandbox, sun is shining through the eucalyptus trees, children are giggling on the monkeybars..and you’re spending your afternoon at your favorite activity: bookbags. Then, suddenly you hear a commotion in the sandbox...precious “Susie” is crying and “Johnny” looks very guilty.

What do you *do*?

Over the years I’ve seen many approaches, but the one I see most often is: **“Johnny tell Suzie you’re sorry”**. Although this is a fine response if you are Miss Manners, I believe there is a lot more we can learn from the incident. In my world, the first response (which, you may have noticed I use frequently) is: **“Suzie you look so sad” (pause)**. Just the comment and the pause alone usually gives 4 year olds time to collect their thoughts, so they can ‘rewind’ and relate the gruesome details. Since I didn’t see what provoked the crying, I really have no basis on which to ‘judge’ wrongdoing. But I can say that, often the person crying was the original perpetrator. Of course Johnny looks guilty because he grabbed her shovel, etc., but it was Suzie who originally grabbed it from him. Without getting in too deep, I usually sympathize that indeed it is hard to share and next time instead of grabbing we need to remember to ask.

Whoa..sorry..slight tangent here..but the *empathy* part is ... **How can we make Suzie feel better”?**

Many kids respond by spouting “I’m sorry”, which is nice and polite, but I’m not sure they really know what that means. Even worse, some have perfected its use as a ‘get out of jail free card’, if you will, and know if they use it in the proper context, they can pretty much get away with anything, short of dismemberment. Alternatives such as brushing sand off of a friend, helping someone up, getting a band aid, reassuring a friend you will ask next time, and so on are the responses we are looking for. It’s the old *actions speak louder than words* deal. And it’s all taught through modeling. When children see adults caring for children, listening and acknowledging their feelings, and taking opportunities to discuss the feelings of others, they learn the beginnings of empathy or the capacity to feel what another person feels. We are trying to teach our children how one person’s actions may produce feelings in another.

The other day during an exciting game of tag when Taylor stumbled on the asphalt, and Shannon sprinted into the kitchen at Trinity House to get her an ice pack out of the refrigerator, I smiled at Mrs. Kern and whispered ‘yes’, I love this school.