

Standing in Another Person's Shoes

One of the most important skills for a child to develop is the ability to consider the perspective of another person. Young children are prone to what is called egocentrism; they tend to think that the way in which they see something (literally) or understand something is the way everyone else does as well. This is why a young child might say, as silly as it sounds, "If I cover my eyes with my hands, can you still see?", or, "If I put my hands over my ears can you still hear?" Over time children will decenter from this egocentric perspective and come to understand that their way of seeing and understanding is just one among many perspectives.

Parents and teachers can encourage and foster the movement away from an egocentric perspective by providing children with experiences and opportunities that ask them to consider what someone else may be believing or thinking. Many books written for children tell stories in which characters express their particular feelings and point of view concerning the events in the story. Exposing children to these kinds of books allows them to see how someone else thinks about the events unfolding in the story. These books also provide an opportunity for parents or teachers to draw the child's attention to the thinking of the character and to ask the child whether she agrees or disagrees with the character's point of view.

The common disagreements that occur between parents and children, sibling and sibling, or friend and friend also offer a good opportunity for children to experience the perspectives of others. Instead of simply eliminating the disagreement or conflict by the imposition of adult authority, these conflicts can be a time when children are asked to both express their own feelings about the situation and think about what the other person is feeling and thinking. For example, when a child is refusing to put his toys away and get ready for bed, a parent can say, "I know you are having a good time and would like to continue playing with your toys but I am worried about your health and want you to get enough rest and not be tired when it is time to go to school in the morning." Parental authority may need to rule the day but with these words the parent has acknowledged that there can be differing perspectives on the same situation.

Children also learn about different perspectives when they are taken out and about in the world and are helped to understand that their behavior may need to change depending upon the context. When you go to the

library, for example, the volume of your voice that was acceptable in the car or on the walk to the library may not be appropriate for the library; you are not the only one there and other people may be studying or reading. All of the toys in your own bedroom are there for you to touch and handle but the toy aisle in the department store presents a different set of expectations for your behavior. You may be able to go to the refrigerator or kitchen cabinet for a snack in your own house whenever you want but in your Aunt Sally's house you need to wait until you are offered a snack. Children move through many different contexts and they come to learn that their behavior may need to change depending upon the context.

It may be a cliché but children do need to learn what it is like to "stand in another's person's shoes." By doing so they decenter from their egocentric perspective and they will come to understand that the world may look differently depending on the shoes and depending on where a person is standing.

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