The Roots of Empathy: Science, Strategies, & Stories from Boston Children's Museum & Making Caring Common

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KATHRYN YORK: Welcome back to the Big and Little Podcast, a podcast for adults about families, children, and our world. My name is Kathryn York, podcast producer and Digital Content Manager at Boston Children's Museum. Today, I'm excited to announce the launch of our new podcast series, Empathy at the Heart. How do we define and express empathy, and how might we help the children and adults in our lives learn to practice it for themselves?
In this podcast series, we'll be diving into all the different spokes on the wheel of empathy and what it looks like in action. Along the way, we'll provide some playful, actionable insights about how to encourage empathy in our families, community, and ourselves. Kicking off the series, Boston Children's Museum's Vice President of Programs and Exhibits, Melissa Higgins, sits down with Milena Batanova and Kiran Bhai from Making Caring Common, a national initiative based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that's dedicated to promoting empathy and caring in schools, families, and communities.
First, we have Doctor Milena Batanova, Making Caring Common's Director of Research and Evaluation. Milena sits at the intersection of research and practice, ensuring that MCC's strategies are grounded in rigorous science and can be easily and effectively used by educators, caregivers, and young people alike. Her research spans vital topics such as loneliness, mental health, purpose, and caring across differences.
We're also joined by Kiran Bhai, Director of Schools and Parenting at Making Caring Common. Kiran leads MCC's K-12 and parenting programs, helping schools and families strengthen children's empathy, build meaningful relationships, and foster a commitment to justice. She also led the development of MCC's mental health toolkit. In addition to her work at MCC, Kiran is also a school counselor.
Together, we dive into what empathy really means for children, from the earliest signs in babies and toddlers to the powerful ways it shapes relationships, kindness, and even social justice. Discover science-backed strategies for nurturing compassion at home and in classrooms. Hear real-world stories of empathy in action, and learn how families and educators can help children build the skills needed to care for each other. Let's get started.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Hi, Milena and Kiran, welcome to The Big and Little Podcast. My name is Melissa Higgins. I'm the Vice President of Programs and Exhibits at Boston Children's Museum. And today, we're going to be talking about empathy in young children. The Museum has a pretty significant initiative around empathy development that we've been working on for about the past year, and it's really influenced a lot of the work that's happening here. So we're excited to talk about your work at Making Caring Common today. Do you mind introducing yourself, and then we can dig into our conversation?

KIRAN BHAI: Sure! Milena, I can get started, then I'll pass it to you. I'm the Program Director at Making Caring Common, and I focus on our school and parenting programs. Before joining MCC, I was a school counselor. So I've spent a lot of time working with young children, teenagers, and their families. And now,

I'm also a new mom. I have a beautiful but kind of wild 15-month-old daughter. So I'm constantly noticing these little moments where both my work and my job as a mother overlap.

MILENA BATANOVA: Great, hi, I'm Milena. I have a six-year-old boy and a girl on the way, which is so exciting. I'm our Director of Research and Evaluation at MCC. I was actually a postdoc at Tufts, which is down the street from Harvard, when I found out about Making Caring Common. And I was so excited at the time. I remember it vividly being so excited to learn of an organization that actually focuses so explicitly on empathy development and kids and young people because that was my whole focus in grad school and during much of my postdoc.
So when a job opened up in MCC when I was finishing up my postdoc, I lucked out. I got the job, and I take my role really seriously. My role is to ensure that we apply the research really well to our programming. I also evaluate a lot of our programs, namely in K to 12 schools, and for parents, adding to the research base, as we call it. But in the past few years, we've also done a ton of our own national research on issues related to moral and social life in America, including mental health in young people and parents, loneliness, and polarization, more generally.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, I mean, at Boston Children's museum, we think about a lot of those issues. And we're also very excited that Making Caring Common is right up the road, and we look very carefully at the research that you all create and generate. And we're excited also about just the mission of Making Caring Common and raising children and young adults who care for others and the common good. But I'm wondering if we could talk a little bit about those specific words, how we define caring and empathy, especially in today's world. What would you say about that?

MILENA BATANOVA: Yeah, I love that question. I think it's important that we really get what they are, that we separate the terms empathy and caring. So all too often we hear about empathy as perspective taking. It's putting yourself in someone else's shoes. But con artists, students who bully, even psychopaths can have pretty sound perspective taking skills.
So we know that empathy is so much more than that. And based on the research at Making Caring Common, we define it with these three components, it's affective, cognitive, and ethical. So the affective part is sharing in others' feelings. The cognitive is really trying to understand their feelings and perspectives, and the ethical part is actually feeling concern or compassion for what they're going through.
And caring, is where you take it further, and it really fills that empathy action gap. So it's more about expressing the empathy. It's about how we communicate and behave in ways that reflect our understanding and concern. We like to define it as treating people with kindness and respect and compassion, even when they come from different backgrounds or have very different lives from our own.

MELISSA HIGGINS: So I guess, right at the start of this, you both mentioned some of the children in your own lives. I'm sure you have lots of folks in your own lives who are young people. I also have an under two-year-old at home, and then at the museum, we think about our audience broadly as children birth to age 10, and of course, the grown-ups in their lives as well.

And we think a lot about empathy and the development of empathy, especially with really young children, because that's a lot of our audience. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the science tells us about empathy development, especially with very young children.

MILENA BATANOVA: Yeah, so, Kiran, I can take this. If you have anything to add, feel free. It is developmentally present though, even from birth. So babies and toddlers show such great moral sensitivity. They cry in distress when they hear or see someone else is in distress. They prefer pro-social behavior. And what I mean by that is in experiments over and over-- this is really fascinating-- researchers find that babies tend to prefer what they call the helpers or the givers over the hinderers or the takers, which I think is amazing because it really speaks to our capacity early on for true empathy and compassion.

And while toddlerhood is really challenging, ages two and three are difficult, it's also really amazing that toddlers do start to spontaneously share. So if they see an object on the floor, they see that you drop something, they actually can pick it up and hand it over. They can help adults at home or wherever with very simple tasks. And between two to three ages, kids can really comfort and help someone in distress. And while they might not do it voluntarily, they might not do it frequently or as much as we'd like, they do have capacity to act in ways that are pro-social. It's just up to us as the adults to encourage that behavior and to model it, and this doesn't mean that we tell them what to do. And I've done this too when my kid was little: “Share! Share!” We say “share,” or we tell them how we want them to behave, and they're just not developmentally ready for it.

But instead, we can scaffold or model that behavior. And what that means is really trying to guide it, nudge it along. So instead of saying, share, we can say, “Oh, she looks sad. Do you think that maybe you could give her that toy of yours that she really likes?” And it's okay if the kid says “No.” I think the hardest thing for a parent is to be okay with that and not think like you're doing something wrong but to keep doing it and keep encouraging it. And maybe over time, they will care to do that. And by age four, kids actually do really start to understand perspective taking.

That cognitive piece really starts to take shape and starts to take form. So they are capable of helping or sharing more voluntarily. And between ages five to seven, kids can actually help and show compassion when no one's watching, which is really amazing. And I think the hard part is if they're not doing that when no one's watching, or you don't think they're doing that, to just keep encouraging it and modeling it. Because they totally have the capacity to do it.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Kiran, did you want to add anything to that?

KIRAN BHAI: I mean, Milena, I think, covered most of what we know through science, and the only thing I would add is I love how you said that there's components of empathy that can start from birth, seeing them mimic behaviors. So I think it's important to continue to model empathy and different components of it throughout.

So that affective and cognitive component, helping them as they're watching a TV show, or you're reading a book, connect with how different characters' emotions are playing out, what they're feeling, and then tying it to those caring acts after. So I think throughout, there's opportunities to model, and as Milena said, nudge.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, I mean, so I think about that sometimes on the playground with my own kid with some of the modeling. And then of course, in the museum, we see some amazing examples because we have so many different ages of children here. Even young children, like the four-year-olds who are starting to model it for the even younger kids who are here.
So it's really amazing when that starts to happen. Like you were saying, when the adult isn't intervening at all, and you can see that the kids are really showing that to others, and the empathy development is happening right in front of you, which is always the best.
I'm wondering if we could talk a little bit more about the empathy development in young children in terms of what it actually can look like across ages. We started to touch on this, but what does it really look like for different age groups, and then how does that affect them in their development when they're starting to show empathy across their growth?

KIRAN BHAI: I think Milena touched a little bit on with the different age groups what it would look like. So at the beginning, you could cry in response to distress. So you're almost mimicking emotions, and you're connecting with emotions, even though at the beginning, I think it's before age two, a child doesn't know that they're separate from other people. So it's a lot of merging of those emotions.
And then after that, I do think there's a lot of mimicking behaviors and reflecting what they see around you. So it's how their parents and their community around them are interacting with the world. And then after that, you'll start seeing some of those more pro-social behaviors and actions. And even though it's not fully the type of empathy that we're expressing as adults, it is a type of empathy which is still really special.
But I think what's really awesome is that when kids practice empathy, you can see that the world really just opens up for them. They're able to connect with people from different backgrounds and different experiences, and they learn about others and themselves in a really meaningful way. And when kids are practicing empathy, it also helps them build those really deep, caring relationships with their friends and their family, teachers, peers in their schools, and can lead to real sense of belonging.
Milena, you can add to this, but we know from research that empathy and these connections can support both mental and physical well-being throughout their life. And another important piece I think we don't talk about enough is that empathy, while it has all of these amazing benefits, it can also cause a little bit of overwhelming emotions for young people.
So highly empathetic kids really feel things deeply, just like many of us do. And that can be very overwhelming for a young child. But with the right support and guidance, that sensitivity can become more of a strength and help them grow into very compassionate, understanding adults that can build a kinder world.

MILENA BATANOVA: Yeah, no, I love that. That's such a good point. Not to nerd out, but I remember in grad school, one of my favorite empathy researchers is Nancy Eisenberg. And I really appreciated a lot of her work on emotion regulation and emotionality in general. And she would really emphasize the importance of teaching our kids emotion regulation and how to really work through their feelings and their emotions so that they could use empathy for good so that it wouldn't turn into distress.
Because when empathy goes unchecked, it can turn into distress or burnout or fatigue. But if we adults and kids alike learn to manage our emotions and work through them, then we can really be more skilled

at how we exercise our empathy. Yeah, I went through the developmental stages a little bit from zero to seven. I think it's important to really recognize just how capable kids are of empathy even early on.
By age four, by age five, like I said, they are so capable of feeling empathy, expressing empathy. And my favorite part is when it turns into action. It's that caring piece. So when kids notice that maybe a classmate or a friend is alone, and they go over to them to keep them company or to share a snack, or they think someone is being mistreated, and they stand up for them. Those are the really incredible moments, but they take courage. And they take a lot of our adult support as well.
We need to model and encourage that, and they need to feel like they can, in fact, do those things. And they won't be penalized, for instance. Stepping in and standing up for someone can be risky, and there's a lot of literature around this, how empathy can be avoided when it feels risky or when it feels like there's nothing really in it for someone. So it's okay to reward it as well. We need to reward it socially, and we need to make it feel like it's a good thing to do.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, I mean, some of what you're talking about almost makes me think of empathy as a superpower. It's a skill that you can develop, and then you can use it for really amazing, good things. I guess, as you were saying in the very beginning, perspective taking, of course, could be used for some negative things, manipulation of others. But empathy as a superpower is an interesting way to think about this, and you can imagine kids in their class being the hero when they're willing to take that risk and apply it in a really awesome way.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, I love that.

MELISSA HIGGINS: So one other thing I wanted to talk about is I know that especially at Making Caring Common, there are some connections between empathy and kindness, yes, but also justice and equity. And I'm wondering if you could talk about how empathy helps children and adults recognize things like fairness and caring about the collective well-being?

KIRAN BHAI: Milena, I can start. I'd love to share some examples from our work at MCC. But in general, when you practice empathy, it is a muscle that you need to grow and maintain actively. And you're able to learn about the perspectives and feelings of others, including those that are different from you.
And that's what's so critical in understanding and pursuing justice and to promote collective well-being is to be able to do that perspective taking and want to learn about people that are different and prioritize their needs. However, empathy doesn't automatically lead to these skills and this understanding, and you have to work towards that and build those habits and push children into considering different people.
So one of our strategies that I love that we've been doing forever at MCC is called circle of care. And this really helps get at the start of the connection between empathy and justice and what Milena mentioned earlier, bridging that empathy action gap. So when you have that knowledge about what people are going through, how can you tie it to more caring acts?
So what we do in the strategy is we ask students to consider who is in their circle of care. So that's a group of people that they think about, that they care about, and have empathy for and want to offer kindness to. And then they do a reflection through different prompts and questions that they think about who are other people in their community that they interact with, and how can they pull them into the circle

of care? So expanding their circle and doing more intentional and kind and caring acts to really do those pro-social acts to grow their circle of care. So that gets at one way where you can help a child take that base of empathy, that affective and cognitive components, and then grow it to more people and tie it to those caring acts.

MILENA BATANOVA: The way I like to think of it is empathy is a great rehearsal for recognizing fairness and caring about fairness, but in no way does it automatically lead people to care about justice or the collective. Those are two separate things. They're interrelated, but they are separate. Someone could care very deeply about another person enduring hardship in some way, say a homeless person.
But they might really actually support or just ignore the very systems that perpetuate them being homeless or having that suffering. And it might be because they just don't quite see how people's circumstances really shape their experiences, and that's what we call social empathy. So that takes a greater form of understanding, and it takes motivation to care about that.
You need to want to learn and have that knowledge about systems or structures that might perpetuate inequality in some way. At the same time, though, I think it's important to recognize that just because you pursue justice, or you care about equity or justice, doesn't necessarily mean you have total empathy either. You might actually find it very hard to empathize with people who don't care about the same justice cause you care about, or if they just simply disagree.
You might find it really hard to empathize with people that you disagree with or that don't agree with you. So I think it goes both ways, and I think what we really try to promote through that strategy, but also many other strategies in compilation, is the blending of the two, really understanding that both are important, but also respecting people for their differences.
Some people just might not care as much for justice or certain justice issues, but maybe they really do try to empathize day to day with people and maybe people different from them. That's great. I think that's the least we can do, and I think that lays the groundwork right for bigger or broader issues. And I think there is a lot of potential with kids. I think I had reviewed up until ages five to seven. Between seven to eleven, kids really start to understand the principles of justice.
They really start to understand fairness and what that means. So they might truly notice if it may be certain students are the ones being bullied at school perhaps, or maybe girls aren’t as frequently picked for STEM club or other activities. Why is that? And it's important to really scaffold and push them to ask why. Not just to notice but to really question like why is that happening, and what can I do about it? Is there anything I can do about it without, of course, jeopardizing their safety in any way. So going back to that risky piece.

MELISSA HIGGINS: I want to ask a follow up about the circle of care because obviously we're talking a lot about these strategies and things we can do with children. But I'm wondering, is the circle of care something that you do as an exercise with educators and professional development? Because I'm just thinking about how valuable that could be for all adults, especially at this moment in time, perhaps, to think about your own circle of care. And I'm wondering what sorts of responses you might get from adults engaging in that exercise.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, that's a great follow up. So all of our parenting strategies, we always try to make it twofold. So you're helping guide your child through the activities such as circle of care, but you're also doing the reflection on your own. So you're both working on your own empathy, growing that, because again, it's a muscle you continue to work on throughout your life. It doesn't end at the age of 9 when you have more awareness.
So we definitely highlight that. We do also always hope that teachers and educators are doing the practices themselves, but I agree with you. I think it'd be wonderful if more educators were doing that practice because educators also deal with families, children, colleagues that are vastly different from them and have different backgrounds.

MILENA BATANOVA: Yeah, we don't call it circle of care for parents, but we do get at the idea and the principles in one of our empathy-based strategies for parents of younger kids, whether it be kids like 4 to 7 or 7 to 10, and it's literally called How To Develop Empathy. And it's one of my favorite strategies. Kiran knows this. I love this strategy. It's simple, but it's powerful.
And I think I love it so much because I did the evaluation of it as part of this greater longitudinal evaluation of our parenting strategies. And this one, in particular, got a lot of good positive feedback from parents. And basically, that strategy really encourages parents to embrace differences while looking for commonalities. So it gets at that idea of expanding circles of concern where parents have to engage in it with their kids.
And the first step is to look out for differences, not as something bad or discomforting, but as something really good, whether it be in a movie you're watching or something you're reading or something that you see. Recognize it, talk about it, invite questions from your kids, and then try to find some commonality. That common humanity piece is so important. I think it's also great to just encourage difference and learn from our differences, but we also want to embrace and encourage commonality.
And the way we do it, we suggest using just like me or just like you language. So for example, a kid might feel very different from someone and just not be able to empathize or understand where they're coming from, and you can say, well, I know you play differently, or you like to do different things. But they also like basketball just like you, and maybe that's that one commonality that can bring you together.
And I remember, because I also did a lot of interviews with parents, I was surprised at how many parents told me that totally worked for them. They didn't really love the idea at first. They thought it was a bit forced, and I'll admit, I myself was a little nervous about how that strategy would play out in real life. But it was awesome that parents said they really enjoyed doing it with their kids and seeing their kids-- like to what Kiran said earlier-- open up. And it really did open up their world, and it opened up their minds, which was really cool.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, that seems like a very accessible strategy. Something easy to try, and like you're saying, just see how it goes, and maybe it will surprise you. So another thing, you mentioned this right at the start of our conversation, Milena, Making Caring Common does some really important work around divisions in our country and differences but even to the extent of thinking about hate and loneliness. And I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about how empathy can help bridge those divides, and what role young people, young children, could play in mending those fractures that separate all of us.

MILENA BATANOVA: Yes, this is a big question, and I really appreciate it because there is some-- actually, there's a lot of rhetoric. It depends on what media you might consume, but there's increasingly more rhetoric that empathy is toxic and that it's bad and that it's something we shouldn't be doing. I think the overarching argument is that it's selective and that it's emotionally biased in terms of who certain people are empathizing for, say, maybe marginalized or vulnerable populations.

And so we're even at that point now where things like empathy and kindness are being politicized, which of course, to us is very concerning. And I want to be clear, the idea that empathy is selective or emotionally biased or narrow in scope in some way, that's actually not new. Empathy researchers have been writing about this. We know this.

As practitioners, we know this, and this is exactly why we have that circle of care strategy. We know that empathy can be narrow and selective, but it can also be learned, and it can be expanded on to be used rationally and justly. So like Kiran said, it's a muscle. And just like any muscle, it can be exercised. We need to practice it so that it becomes more of a skill so that we can, in fact, broaden our scope and empathize with a whole host of different people and circumstances.

So empathy isn't really the problem. It's the way that we're applying it. Our lack of skill to exercise it well, and I would say our lack of support, social support and social infrastructure, to use and apply it well. So in addition to that strategy circle of care, we have a number of strategies that lead children to empathize and care across differences.

We also have a really comprehensive educator toolkit for bridge building in classrooms, and it basically walks schools and educators through three phases of how they can get to navigating difficult conversations. Because instead of avoiding them, we want to welcome them and encourage empathic dialogue. And there's so many awesome organizations that are already doing this as well actively with students or founded by students.

So one of my favorite ones is called Bridge USA. I think they were founded over a decade now by college students who wanted to bring together students of different political ideologies to have empathic dialogue. So that's been happening. It's happening more. So I think we really need to continue to elevate the importance and the benefits of empathy.

In no way is it toxic. It is literally, as Marty Hoffman, one of the great researchers, once said, it is the glue to social life. If we don't have empathy, we no longer have good relationships, good friendships, good communities. So it is absolutely vital that we not only work to foster it, we restore it, and we work to strengthen it.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, empathy is glue to social life. That is pretty powerful. So that makes a lot of sense.

MILENA BATANOVA: Not my words. Hoffman came up with that one.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, I love that. I'll just, Melissa, zoom into your second question, which is what role can young people play? And I think just keeping it simple and focusing on the foundation. I think while there's deep divisions in our society right now, there's still so much room to connect across those differences. And this is how we start in our schools. As Milena mentioned, our program has a three-phase model, and you start first with connection and trust building in the classroom and in the school.

And you use that as a foundation to then move on to the second phase, where you're learning those essential skills you need to care across difference. And a big part of that is, one, learning about empathy and its importance and its power and learning to listen deeply. And I think if young people are open and curious, are asking empathetic questions and using that knowledge and deeply listening to show they care, there's a huge role that young people can play. And there's a lot of hope in there right now.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, that's really interesting for us to think about here at the museum where we focus a lot on empathy. We try and create spaces that will foster empathy and invite certainly that curiosity and ability to ask questions of others. But it is a little different in that the families who come here often don't know each other.
So in a classroom, you can have that longer opportunity to build a relationship and get to know each other, whereas here, often, it's the first time you're engaging with a different family. So it can be tricky. But certainly, it's what we're aiming for. It's what we're hoping for with a lot of our spaces and our programs that we offer that there is that opportunity to engage in discussion around difference in a really empathic way.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, I mean, that is a huge challenge, but I've been taking my daughter to the museum here in Albuquerque often. And you do end up finding those really wonderful organic relationships there because you're like, that parent is also not working on Mondays and always-- same nap schedule. So our kids end up playing, and I made a really beautiful friendship with somebody there. And I do feel like museums have so much space to curate those experiences, and it's amazing that you're thinking about that.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, always trying to test out new things and see what is going to work for the visitors here. Speaking of museums, we're just starting to talk a little bit more about our spaces. And of course, everything we do in children's museums tends to be focused on play as a powerful way to learn about ourselves and about others.
And I'm wondering if we could talk a little bit about the role of play, playful learning, and imaginative experiences with empathy development, and some ways that perhaps adults in children's lives, whether it's parents or caregivers or teachers, can model that caring and empathy for children in those playful, simple, everyday moments.

KIRAN BHAI: I'll start because I love this question. As a school counselor, I worked with kindergarten through eighth graders, and I think it's so special to be a school counselor because unlike a therapist that you see in an office or on Zoom now for an hour a week, you're embedded into the child's life in their school where they are for a majority of their week. And play is such an important way you can connect with the child.
Both play with others and imaginative play are wonderful ways to start practicing empathy early on. So when you're thinking about a child playing with somebody else or playing with a peer, they have the opportunity to practice these huge life skills. They're learning about emotions, their own emotions, and other children's emotions. They're practicing navigating conflict, showing support to others, and in real time, taking what they're seeing from your modeling and the world around them and enacting them.

So it's a great opportunity to, one, have children do this on their own and letting them play this out and then supporting them through conflicts that arise and helping them reflect on their play. During imaginative play, children again, are able to connect things that they are learning from their world, whether it's books you're reading to them, TV shows, seeing their teachers interact with each other. And as a parent, you have the opportunity to both observe this and encourage empathic behaviors. And again, this is why the work you're doing in the museum is so important. And when I'm thinking about modeling, I touched upon this earlier, but children are watching everything we're doing. They're like little sponges that are soaking in everything, including how, when, and to whom we're showing empathy and kindness.

And so I feel that it's really important for us as adults, educators, or parents to build in those simple moments to help them keep practicing empathy, so doing this yourself and helping children do this while they're playing. So things like taking another person's perspectives during a disagreement, so with a sibling or a friend, pausing to notice when someone's not feeling well or someone's distressed and seeing how we can check in with them, and finding small but intentional ways to care about others through kind actions.

And I'll say there's one example I can think of how we're doing this in our home with our 15-month-old. And we have all our neighbors are out walking all the time, and sometimes we're in a rush. But most of the time, I try to be really intentional about stopping and talking to people and not just asking how they're doing, responding with a word and walking away, but taking the time to learn about our neighbors and using that to tie it to kind action. So we bump into one of our neighbors who lives on our street who's an elderly woman who lives alone and can't really walk.

So she's in a wheelchair and can't go to the park, but she loves to go to the park, which she mentioned when we were together. So every Sunday, we go on a little family walk, and one of us is pushing the stroller, and the other one's pushing the wheelchair with our neighbor. And it's such a special moment because sometimes my daughter will reach over and hold her finger, and she's like babbling. And it's just a quick 20 minutes, but it's a nice touch point for us to care for our neighbors and reflect the values that we hold in the family.

MELISSA HIGGINS: That's an amazing example. Yeah, I'm guessing that also has very positive impacts on you and any grownups that are-- yeah, because it's really nice to feel like you're connected to your community.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, empathy feels good when you're doing it. It feels good for the person who's receiving the care. Overall, positive benefits, and I'm hoping it's like little seeds that are being planted for my daughter and modeling how to show empathy when she's older.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

MILENA BATANOVA: So two things came to mind when you were talking, Kiran. One, you said something about when there's distress to check in. I think this is a really hot topic for us parents, how to navigate this or when to check in when it comes to play, especially because my kid is six, and he loves play fighting. So when you ask the question, I did not have the reaction Kiran did.

I'm like, oh, play is hard because all my kid wants to do is play with Marvel superheroes, and they're all fighting bad guys. And there's always some pretend explosion, and it's just not my jam. So I love to organize play dates so I don't have to do that. And so usually, I mean, whether it's two boys or my kid and a girl playing, and they'll argue.
Because someone's superhero didn't fight the way they wanted, or they fought too rough. And so in some way, they're in distress. They'll come over. They'll complain. They'll be on the verge of tears. And at first, of course, I want to validate, and I want to listen. But it's also a great opportunity for them to learn how to resolve that conflict and how to deal with it.
So it also goes back to what Kiran was talking about resolving conflict. And what's worked for us-- I don't know where I picked this up from, but now I say, okay, are you hurt? No, are they hurt? No, is any sort of hurt involved? And usually, no, okay, go deal with it. Go figure it out. Go talk to each other. And so it's like that little encouragement scaffolding piece that I try to integrate, and then what's the other thing I was-- Oh, the play piece.
Yeah, I don't love that play with my kid, but what we do a lot of at our house is we play a lot of games. We play a lot of board games or anytime a game, usually after dinner. And I love how it's a really great opportunity for us to call out rules that are not fair. Our kid likes to come up with rules that just make no sense or that obviously benefit him.
And we're like, no, that's not fair because that only is good for you and not us. So it's a great opportunity to explain fairness and all that stuff. And we also hear each other out. Sometimes, we might see things differently. So to Kiran's point, it's a great opportunity to exercise perspective taking. It's also a great opportunity to learn kids to lose and to actually celebrate other people's wins.
So we do not try to get him to win a lot of the time. I mean, sometimes we might give him an upper hand. So he's not always losing, but I'm so proud of the fact that our kid loses pretty well. He's a pretty good loser at a game. And so if I win especially, he's usually so happy because we build an alliance against dad. And so in some twisted way, we're really teaching cooperation and healthy competition.
And I have to explain what it means to have an alliance. But it's just one way of teaching these empathy skills that are fun and kind of covert. I don't want parents to feel like this has to be something so top of mind and explicitly explained. I think you can teach it and do it in ways that maybe you're already doing, and you just don't realize. You're actually teaching empathy in really cool ways.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, I mean, I think everything that both of you just shared is getting at this notion that just by engaging a bit more with your neighbors or by encouraging some additional conversation between children before a grown up steps in, these are pretty accessible ways that you're reinforcing some of these empathy concepts on a regular basis.
So yeah, I love all of these suggestions and strategies. They're great. So I know that both of you really engage with the idea that there are links between empathy and caring relationships and mental health. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how strong empathic relationships support children's emotional and mental well-being, and how communities can help foster that kind of connection.

KIRAN BHAI: I'll start. So we created this mental health toolkit at MCC, and I feel like it ties all these concepts together because we are an organization that is rooted in empathy and wants to promote children caring about collective well-being. So this toolkit that's right now being used in about 400 schools

across the country, and throughout these lessons, my goal in my role at MCC and as a school counselor was to embed the importance of caring relationships throughout all of these lessons.
So while kids are learning about how to navigate difficult emotions and build healthy coping skills and learning about depression and anxiety, we pull in empathy and caring relationships so teens and children know that while they're learning these concepts, they don't have to do it alone. And with empathy, they're able to support their peers and friends better as well as we know that a lot of children are going through really difficult moments on and off. And in general, I think empathy and caring relationships are such a big protective factor for children's well-being.
So if you practice empathy, as we mentioned, you might have stronger conflict resolution skills. You're able to recognize others' emotions better, and in turn, you're able to support your friends more. And that's really meaningful. And hopefully, empathy, as we said, leads to more kind and caring acts. And we know that research says that can have a deep impact on children's emotional well-being but also their physical well-being. And that's not just for children, but for adults as well. You just feel better when you're doing kind and caring acts.

MELISSA HIGGINS: That's a really beautiful thing to point out that you will just feel better. Everyone will feel better.

MILENA BATANOVA: I think to your second question, Melissa, how can communities help foster the connection. In particular, I think it's just about carving out the time and the space and normalizing it, making it a priority. I'll admit, I was a bit shocked when my kid started kindergarten. He had orientation, and there were no activities whatsoever aimed at the kids getting to know each other. Like none.
They were talking more to us parents, walking us through protocols and how things are, the classroom. But all the kids just sat separately with no nudge or opportunity to really get to know each other. And I just thought to myself, wow, what a missed opportunity. This is the first time they're ever laying eyes on each other. They could have played some fun games.
They could have done something cool. And to this day, my kid still complains that they don't get enough time to play. They don't get enough time at recess, and that's where he's making his friends. And I mean, he's a pretty social kid, and he still doesn't have as many friends. And I think part of it is they just don't have that time.
And I remember last year for another project, I was in North Carolina doing focus groups with teens, and one of their biggest complaints, they talked a lot about achievement pressure and just how much stress they're under to perform and to do well. And these were not just like high-achieving schools. These were kids in a variety of communities. And one of their biggest complaints was that they simply didn't have enough time at school to just hang out.
Even at lunch, their lunches were short, and they said a lot of their recess or-- I forget what they called it-- recreation times were for studying. They weren't for connecting. And I know it's hard. There's so many different priorities, but I think communities like schools need to be creative in carving out that time and that space for kids to really connect with each other and not just focus on things like achievement.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, because as we've been saying, empathy and some of these pro-social skills can really-- ultimately, those are the things that can help people achieve later in life because it helps with

your success. But also, this reminds me that, of course, the museum and other community spaces like the playground and other places where families can get together and have informal completely unstructured or child-led time.
Those are great opportunities to get to know others and hopefully, again, build those empathy skills and flex the muscles. So yeah, that's really important stuff. So we have talked about this a little bit over the course of some of the questions that have come up, but we're all three of us here are caregivers of young children to varying degrees, different ages, but young children.
And Making Caring Common works nationally to elevate these conversations about raising moral and emotionally healthy children. And I'm curious about what messages you personally wish more parents and caregivers understood about empathy and caring and moral development and what also you tell yourself when you or your child are having a rough time, a rough day.

MILENA BATANOVA: I can go, Kiran.

KIRAN BHAI: Sure.

MILENA BATANOVA: I love this question. I love it so much because I feel like as parents and caregivers, we're constantly bombarded with messages. I love Instagram, but I get stressed out. Because I feel like I'm constantly being told what to say and what to do with my kid. And it's oftentimes around behavior management, or that magic phrase that will just make them listen. And when that phrase doesn't work, you're like, what am I doing wrong?
So I feel like a lot of the messages we get are about what we can say or do with our kids. I truly don't think we get enough messages about how we actually treat one another and the kinds of expectations we need to set for our kids. And I think these are two related concepts that we need to treat one another with the same sort of empathy and respect we expect from our kids and that we need to set really high ethical expectations for our kids.
So kids learn empathy by seeing it in action or not seeing it. So if my kid doesn't see me making an effort with my friends, or talking positively of others or trying new things, embracing differences like we talked about or being good to myself, how can I expect that of them? And if I don't make my expectations clear, things like, we don't hit. We don't back talk others. How can I then blame them for not being empathic?
I mean, maybe for me, this is the hardest thing because I know I set high expectations, and I know I treat other people well. So when my kid isn't acting the way I'd like, or he's not exhibiting the empathy that I'm nurturing, I feel bad as a parent. And so maybe relatedly, I also want us to give each other grace. I want us to also not like judge so quickly. I see this all the time where we can really judge or be unsupportive of one another as opposed to really seek to understand and support and not come to quick conclusions, especially if that's what we want of our kids.
And I guess maybe to go full circle, I was talking about messages and the kinds of stuff we're bombarded with. One thing I really do appreciate from Instagram, I remember seeing this a while ago, and it's really helped me with having a little who's not so little anymore. I mean, he's six. But I remember it said, remember, your little isn't giving you a hard time.
They're having a hard time. That really helped me. I was like, oh my gosh. And I loved it because it wasn't telling me what to do or what to say. It was just reminding me that we're human and that they're little, and

they're learning and that I need to-- just like I need to give myself grace, I need to give them grace. So that's been really helpful to me.

KIRAN BHAI: Milena, I'm really connecting with everything you're saying but especially the piece of having empathy and grace for everyone involved. So yourself as a parent, your child who's learning and is just a little human. I always try to remind myself. My daughter's been on this planet for 15 months. Everything we're talking about, I'm still figuring it out myself.
When we talk about compassion fatigue and being overwhelmed, all of that stuff we know from research, and I know I'm trying to teach it to families and children, but I'm learning that actively. So I always try to remind myself she's been alive for 15 months. And during that time, I was in the postpartum phase and navigating work-life balance.
So there's so many puzzle pieces that we're trying to fit together as parents. So I love that you're talking about giving yourself, other parents, and your child grace. I think that's a great place to start. And not to add more to parents' to-do list because we're already doing so much, but one thing that's been so helpful to me when thinking about morals and ethics and instilling empathy and important values into my family is this new practice.
It just takes a few minutes every couple of months, but my partner and I try to take a pause every few months. And we'll see what that timeline will be like as our daughter gets older. But right now, like every three or four months, we try to pause and check in with each other about how we are living the values that we're talking about, what are we doing through our actions and our words and our modeling to reflect those values so our daughter can learn from them, and does she have opportunities to practice them? Because I think it's so common to feel like, oh, these values are so strong, and they're a big part of us and a big part of our relationship and our marriage and our families, that she'll just pick them up. But in those check-ins, every few months, I'm like, oh, we actually aren't doing anything to promote this, or we're not actually doing anything to do that. I just feel it strongly because I have a strong sense of moral identity. So that's been really helpful, and I think I'm hoping we can continue that as she grows older.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, that's a lovely practice. I would love to adopt that in my own family. I think I'm also finding some comfort in, well, everything you're saying, but especially this notion, just like we talk a lot at the museum about how kids-- it is amazing to be a kid, but it can be hard. And so when you're saying like, oh, my kid's not giving me a hard time. They're having a hard time.
Yeah, it can be hard to be in this world as a little person. So we do think about that and ways we can help support that, make it maybe a little bit easier. But the notion that if kids are having a hard time or if grown-ups are having a hard time, that just showing empathy to others can make you feel better. And that's probably going to make your kid feel better, too, because they're going to sense that.
That's a comforting thing that you're showing yourself grace and maybe showing others some form of empathy, and everybody is going to do better because of that. I like that. It feels like a doable thing in our own everyday lives. So this is a big question, but an important one. I'm wondering if we could spend some time thinking about, if you're imagining the kind of future we could build by raising a generation of empathic young people, what would that world look like to you? And what gives you hope that we can get there?

MILENA BATANOVA: That's a great last question. For me, what gives me hope are my friends and my various communities. I talked about the need to message how we treat each other, and I feel really grateful and lucky that I have such great friends and support systems and that many of them are from different backgrounds. I have a lot of different communities of friends, some parents, some non-parents. And what gives me hope are the ones who remember to check in or who voluntarily offer to help out. Like today, it was incredible. In order to do this podcast, I knew that I can't have my kid here because he would interrupt me incessantly. So I messaged a group of friends to see if anyone could watch him for over an hour. And one of them immediately was like, no problem.

And I feel so lucky that I have that and that I know that friend has equally high expectations for our kids. And that she'll insist on those in how they treat each other, my kid and her kids. So yeah, that gives me hope. I feel like we're in a time where we're just surrounded by so much negativity, globally and nationally, and it is so easy to feel hopeless.

But we also know that there are so many great things happening locally in our communities, and that's also where morality starts. I mean, morality really starts like with our neighbors, with our friends, with our acquaintances, with strangers that we choose to talk to. So as long as we continue to show up and be there for one another and treat each other with respect and the kind of respect and empathy we want to see in the world, I think our young people will be fine.

KIRAN BHAI: I'm glad you started because I feel like this is the hardest question. I think it's so important to feel hope. Because when you feel hopeless, you feel stuck, and it can feel hard to do any of the things we're talking about, like having empathy and trying to be kinder, trying to make a world a better place. So it's important to have hope.

And I would say what Milena's saying is probably my biggest coping in this time when things feel really distressing. And on Instagram, it's either I'm bombarded by really distressing headlines about what's going on in the world or parenting advice where I'm like, oh no, there's another thing I have to do. But really zooming into my community and being open to noticing kind acts and people going out of their way to get to know different people and learn about others and do kind things for others.

I think that's one way that I feel like the hope is still alive, because I also feel lucky that I have a wonderful community, which includes you two. People I can lean on, and parenting is tough too. So having a good support system is so important. But one thing that really ignited my hope a few weeks ago was I'm trying to get back into the classroom more.

I want to make sure our work at Making Caring Common continues to stay very relevant and grounded in the classroom. But now I'm hooked to it because it was so energizing to be in a classroom again with all of these young people who are doing all the things. Schools are amazing because you are put in classes with people who are not your friends, people who are different, adult students, and just like play, they're like doing all of these things in real time to practice developing into wonderful, kind, smart, intelligent humans.

So it was so great to be able to see. I was shadowing an incredible educator who's here in Albuquerque, and it was just great. They were talking about identifying bias and how you can identify in your own life and news outlets, and it was just so energizing to see them doing that work and doing the hard work to learn it and listening to other people's ideas and not just dismissing them. I'm hoping that they're integrating it into their worldview, and that will impact them later.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, I always find it, especially in the museum, when you're seeing kids have those very small interactions with each other that end up feeling very meaningful. And, even if it's just giving the kid who is sad a train from the train table when they have a sense that maybe that's what they're waiting for, those small moments I think do really add up. And they bring hope to I think a lot of the staff here and hopefully other families who are witnessing those small interactions. But I do think the kids give us a lot of hope. So it's lovely to be in classrooms or in the museum or in those spaces where they're really showing some of that.

KIRAN BHAI: Yeah, we'll have to come visit the museum again soon.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yes. Any time. Any other parting thoughts you want to leave? I think you covered so much ground in this hour, so I really appreciate it.

MILENA BATANOVA: Both Kiran and I mentioned feeling hopeful because of community and support. I want to acknowledge also because of our loneliness work and our work in connections in general, we know that many people might not have that or feel like it's lacking. In our loneliness survey last year, we found that it was astronomical. It was like 35% of adults in America feel like they have no meaningful community, and that is really distressing.
And many parents reported challenges that affect their mental health day to day. The number one being overstressed and overworked and having relationship issues or lack of social support. So I want to acknowledge that not everyone has that. So it's up to us. So it's up to everyone to be there for each other. So if you're not the one experiencing loneliness or stress, reach out. Be that change. Reach out. Be that support system because it's so important to really show up for one another.
And someone shouldn't have to ask a parent, shouldn't have to reach out to their friends over and over asking for help or playdates. It would be really nice if that becomes reciprocated, and we know that, ultimately, that's what makes for a really good, strong moral society is reciprocal altruism. It's when people will actually notice and give back, and we actually know that giving back makes us feel good. So the more we do it, the more it benefits all of us.

MELISSA HIGGINS: Yeah, what a great note to end on. That seems like a perfect note for us to take a pause here. But I do want to thank you both so much for spending time with us today and talking about empathy and sharing some, I think, really actionable strategies that folks can try at home in their grown-up life and with their families and their young children. So I really appreciate it.

MILENA BATANOVA: Thank you so much for having us.

KIRAN BHAI: Awesome. Thank you so much.

MELISSA HIGGIN: Thank you.

KATHRYN YORK: Thanks for listening to the Big and Little Podcast. We're excited to have you with us on this new series on empathy. Stay tuned for more and be sure to like and subscribe.

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