

Empathy in a (Shoe) Box

With four pairs of shoes, you can make a lasting impression on students about empathy. I hide the shoes in mismatched boxes to build the mystery and excitement about what is inside. What is inside? One holds a pair of women's fuzzy slippers, one a heavy pair of adult snow boots. Another box has a pair of dirty football cleats, and the last (tiny) box holds a pair of toddler sneakers. I purchased all of these shoes at the local thrift store - inexpensive, and you can be really creative with the selection of shoes you'll find there!

To begin my lesson, I announce that we are going to learn about empathy, and I define empathy as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes," or thinking about how *they* (as an individual) would feel if they were in the same situation as the person they are watching or interacting with. I randomly select a student to come to the front of the class and choose a shoebox. The chosen student must take off his or her own shoes and put on the shoes from the box (except for the toddler shoes which are held their hands).

A written scenario is glued to the inside top of the box and read out loud by me or the student. For example, the situation presented with the boots is, "The person wearing these boots is running outside to play in the snow with her friends. When she gets to them, they tell her she can't play. How do you think she feels? If you saw this happen, what could you do or say to make her feel better?" The chosen student answers the questions and a class dialogue about empathy begins. Topics discussed include understanding others' feelings by reading facial and body expressions and thinking about how we, ourselves, might feel in a situation.

Many times a student will put on the shoes, listen to the scenario, and say, "*But I am a girl and these are boy shoes. I don't know how a boy would feel.*" Or, "*But I'm a third grader and these are baby shoes; I don't know how a baby would feel.*" Students are taught that they may never fully understand how another person is feeling because we all have differences from one another, but that they should always try to understand.

The second step of showing empathy is acknowledging the person's feelings. By simply stating, "You must feel _____," the person will feel heard and understood or have a chance to clarify how they are, in fact, feeling.

The third and final step is: Do something to help. Offer help or friendship to the person who may be feeling left out, upset, frustrated or sad. Appropriate responses about that person's needs based on how **we** would want to be treated are explored at this time. Continue until each pair of shoes has been worn and discussed. Students remember what empathy means in later lessons because they've literally put themselves in someone else's shoes.

If your students are working on a particular cause you can write scenarios that all deal with that issue.