



Practicing Empathy

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"Say you're sorry." How often have we heard this from a well-meaning adult to kids who were fighting? I have to admit, as a teacher I've done it often myself. Kids do things without thinking. All the time. Perhaps it's because someone did something bad to them and they want to retaliate, or maybe it's simply an impulse. Regardless, when we see kids mess up, we call them out. We bring the parties involved together and often force an apology. They don't mean it. We know they don't mean it. We say it's practice so it becomes hardwired in their brains and before long, it will be automatic for them.

However, we have already seen the fruits of this thinking. We've read the half-hearted "apologies" from people in power who abused their position for years and exploited others. In order to dig deeper, we have to instill a sense of empathy into our children. Unfortunately, empathy is not something that naturally happens to them. Empathy must be developed. This can be done in many ways, but one of the best ways is to put yourself in someone else's place.

As a local community actor, I have played over a hundred different characters. Some of them were

nice people, and some were rather unsavory. My job as an actor is to find the humanity in the person I am embodying. Understanding my character's motive is crucial for me to justify the actions that a person takes to get what they want. Being able to step into someone else's shoes, reflect on their needs, and step back out has made me a better person. I've had lots of practice developing empathy for different people, and theater has provided me a safe place to do this.

I am blessed to teach at a school where we regularly provide our students with opportunities to practice empathy. Theater provides a framework where kids can explore their emotions safely, not by telling them that they should be "sorry," but by practicing the skills needed to truly develop these skills. This month, we will be rehearsing for the middle school play. My goal (beyond telling a story in an entertaining way) is to let our kids explore the skill of seeing themselves in others. What wonderful tools they can use for the rest of their lives! Perhaps if we practice, we can all experience a little more empathy together.