

THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY IN  
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

For the psychotherapist treating children and adolescents the following contrasting scenarios are often evident. Patient A, Mary, age thirteen, presents to the clinic with symptoms of minor acting out. When interviewed she reports great conflict with her parents and a general feeling that they have no understanding of her, nor she of them. She is distressed by their rules. In contrast, she has a good relationship with her boyfriend and has recently been "feeling for him" because he has gotten some flack from one of the groups in his class. Patient B, Tanya , age sixteen, presents to the clinic with symptoms of minor acting out. She is extremely angry with her parents' rules, and has not adhered to them. She, however, can explain her parents' reasons and perspective for creating such rules. These scenarios suggest the girls' different use of empathy and ability to create psychological explanations of others. Mary can empathize with her boyfriend, but not with her parents. In contrast, Tanya can empathize with her parents, despite disliking what they have done.

The clinician may be left wondering why the two children's ability to empathize is so different. Does it relate to innate dispositions and capacities, to differences in child rearing experiences, to changes associated with developmental levels due to age or to cognitive structures, or to all of the above. Most likely, the differences reflect all of these factors. As a clinician, one certainly relates to the emotional and cognitive levels of the individual, though the knowledge of developmental issues and stages remains important to the diagnostic and treatment process. To some extent these guide the therapist's expectations.

The process by which one person is understood by another person has been noted to be a complex one (Hoffman, 1984; Kohut, 1982, 1984; Smither, 1977). In this study, empathy was defined as the activity involved in creating psychological explanations or in understanding the meaning of another's behavior and/or emotional state. Such understanding is developed through an integration of many psychological skills, including the awareness or knowledge of basic affective states, the capacity to understand sequence and context of behavior, the capacity to differentiate internal and external motivational states, the capacity to imagine alternative meanings to behavior, and the capacity to differentiate self from other which involves the issues of egocentricity and decentration.

The goal of this study was to explore the skills involved in empathy in children and adolescents. Several theoretical aspects of empathy, including the definition, the cognitive-affective processes involved in empathy, and developmental issues relevant to the use of empathy in latency and adolescent children were thought to impact upon the concept of empathy in children and adolescents. These will be presented in the literature review. The methods used to assess empathy in a population between ages nine to seventeen were exploratory in design. Subjects were shown video-taped vignettes and then given a semi-structured interview regarding the vignettes. A pre-tested scale called the Davis Scale also was administered to children to assess levels of subskills of the empathic process. The results demonstrated trends in the development of empathy consistent with the hypothesized view that it is a skill which improves with age. In complex situations, older adolescents are able to formulate a more complete understanding of the person they are to understand. Feelings in the empathizer were found to be an integral part of the empathic process. In the implications chapter, suggestions were made for how the clinician might apply the information learned from the study to clinical situations. In particular children's ability to

communicate empathically to each other is not concomitant with the ability to demonstrate an empathic understanding. Suggestions for further research were made.