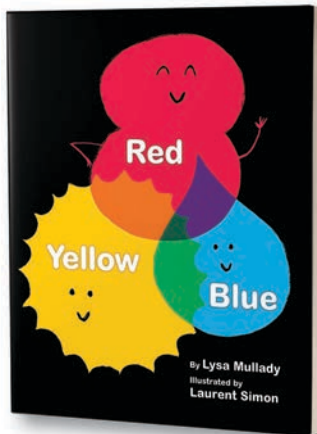




## Three Ways to Help Your Child Build Empathy



As a parent, helping a child become a confident and compassionate member of a community involves helping them develop healthy self-esteem, respect for everyone, and the ability to forgive themselves and others. In *Red Yellow Blue*, author Lysa Mullady suggests these strategies to foster empathy and cooperation:

### Developing Healthy Self-Esteem

As caregivers, we cultivate a strong self-image in our children by helping them discover their unique talents. To develop positive self-worth in a child, start with open and honest dialog. Ask questions about what they like and prefer. When a caregiver acknowledges a child's preferences, they validate the child's unique likes. Providing opportunities for children to choose what they like, and valuing their choices, guides children to feel special for who they are.

Encourage children to explore and develop their unique interests. Start by taking notice of what they choose to do with their independent time. Observing kids doing what they like to do may help parents uncover unique capabilities like artistic creativity, natural athleticism, or scientific curiosity. Encourage kids to try new things often. It's not usual for a child's interests to change. Look for enjoyment, not proficiency. A child may love an activity, but have to work hard to master it. It is more important that a child is trying and having fun than it is to be the most talented in the arena.

Having a strong sense of purpose and accomplishment are also essential to healthy self-esteem. When children are given a responsibility, their actions help the whole family. Look for age-appropriate jobs kids can do in daily routines. Then, make the connection between the child's efforts and the positive effect they have on others. Putting their shoes away keeps everyone safe from tripping over them. Taking plates from the table to the sink makes a big job easier for the person doing the washing. Point out how everyone benefits from the child's assistance.

### Promoting Respect for Everyone

Self-respect is feeling good about who you are. Dignity is feeling worthy of honor and treating others with the same admiration. We are all important as individuals. We also live in communities with others. Young children are, by

nature, self-centered. They see the world as it relates to themselves and their own experiences. As they grow, they need opportunities to develop social skills and empathy.

Positive communication is necessary to work productively in a group. Practicing active listening and speaking with children by picking a topic and talking about it. Reflect what the child says and follow up with a question. It doesn't matter what is discussed; make bantering back and forth fun. When a child is upset, teach them how to talk about their feelings. While using a quiet voice, fill in the blanks: "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_." It is essential that children learn how to speak to others in a peaceful way, even when frustrated. Relating to others in a positive way is the key to collaboration.

### Fostering Forgiveness for Self and Others

We all make mistakes. Caregivers' first helping response should be patience. Teach children that we learn from our mistakes and that there is no need to be ashamed. Emphasize that who we are is separate from our blunders.

Sometimes time and space are needed for people to cool off and rethink their actions. Whenever there is conflict, we need to try to see the events from both points of view. When helping children with disagreements, focus on how each party felt. Once each understands how their actions affected the other, ask "Did you want to make them feel that way?" This question helps build a bridge between hurt and healing.

As they grow, children are developing their ability to stay calm when feeling frustrated. Caregivers can model for children how not to respond to anger with anger and how to walk away from a difficult situation. Taking a deep breath and explaining why it is important to drive safely is the kind of response to being cut off in traffic that demonstrates these skills. Talk about how people are in control of their own actions. One person's bad behavior doesn't make it right for another to behave badly.

Understanding that we are part of a whole promotes a feeling of belonging. As humans, it is essential for our well being that we feel part of a group. To function well in a group, a child needs to develop empathy, and the ability to cooperate and forgive, in balance with a healthy self-esteem and sense of purpose.

#### This Article's Author

**Lysa Mullady** is the author of *Bye Bye, Pesky Fly*, and *Three Little Birds*. She has been an elementary school counselor for 30 years and is known for her engaging, enthusiastic, and creative counseling style. Her passion is to teach her students to be problem solvers by talking it out and thinking good things. Lysa was born and raised on Long Island, where she still lives with her family and two golden-doodles. You can find her on the weekends enjoying the beach with her husband, walking the dogs and searching for beach glass, all while imagining ways to help others become the best they can be.

Check out *Red Yellow Blue* here: [www.apa.org/pubs/magination/441B260](http://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/441B260)

## Red Yellow Blue

Red loves being red! Apples, wagons, fire trucks — he thinks all the best things are red!

Yellow admires Red's roses, but Red just wants to be left to mind his own business — why can't Yellow mind hers?

But when Yellow and Blue go off to make frogs, shamrocks, and caterpillars, Red realizes that he may be missing out. The possibilities are endless when the colors work together!

Includes a Note to Parents and Caregivers with more information on encouraging empathy and cooperation.

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