

# Analysis of Empathy and Family Relationships

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**Abstract.** Empathy is the ability to understand other people's feelings or put oneself in those specific situations. There are two types of empathy, cognitive and affective empathy, one is to understand, and the other one is to experience the emotional states, respectively. Based on a long-time study, family affects the development of children a lot, like how they organize their words to express their feelings influence the children to learn how to say their own feelings in childhood and even adolescence. How parents show warmth to kids and how they support their children may also affect children's ability to show empathy. This may be because children know they can express their feelings to close friends, and boys may know empathy is not a feminine trait that they can also have. Children may act differently when they grow up, and they may show prosocial behaviors or antisocial behaviors depending on their levels of ability to show empathy. Besides the family affecting children's development, mental problems like DBD specifically also play a role. DBD children's emotional and feelings systems have some issues in that they cannot feel others' feelings, which is not that they do not want to, but they cannot. Since they cannot "feel" others, they are more likely to have antisocial behaviors than ordinary people. In all, the family environment and even some mental issues affect the development of children.

**Keywords:** Empathy; Antisocial behaviors; Prosocial behaviors; Parental Expressiveness; Disruptive Behavioral Disorder (DBD).

## 1. Introduction

Humans have feelings and emotions like sadness, anger, happiness, silly, and worry. There is a self-evaluative emotion-guilt, shame, pride, and empathy-in humans, too [1]. There were many correlations between each two in these emotions, but only empathy was researched or debated for over two decades [1]. Eisenberg defined empathy as understanding and comprehending others' emotional states and situations [1]. Empathy is the ability to put oneself in other people's situations and to understand their emotional state or to "feel" the same feelings as others [2]. There are two types of empathy, cognitive empathy is the ability to understand other people's feelings, and affective empathy is the likelihood of experiencing others' emotional state, which is important for children's development [3]. Some humans can "feel" others' feelings, but some are not; maybe they do not want to or cannot feel due to the influence of their parents. Children are more likely to learn a specific type of social and emotional learning during the time between childhood and adolescence, which means they are more likely to be influenced by many factors, like their parents [4]. The empathy-related responses are related to parental expression [5]. The parental expression means "dominant style of exhibiting nonverbal and verbal expressions within a family" [5]. How parents express their emotions regarding their children's behaviors, and how they show their feelings to their children may affect or even "teach" the children how to show empathy to others. There were three types of expression, positive, negative dominant, and negative submissive [5]. The positive one is to compliment what children did or give some prizes to the children, negative dominant expressiveness is to show anger or assertive emotions to children, but negative submissive is to show worry or crying to the children for their behaviors [5]. For example, when a person watches a child crying and feels upset or sad continually, this person is experiencing empathy [5]. This study's findings show that the way parents express their emotional responses is related to the children's empathy-related responses [5]. It may also be because children learn the emotional responses from their parents, and then their empathy puts them into other people's situations to encourage them to feel the feelings and even help others [2]. Hana.Y. et al. studied different types of parental behaviors like "parental knowledge, parental

solicitation, and parental psychological control”, which were related to the “balance connectedness” that the parent-child relationship can enhance the development of empathy and even benefit the prosocial behaviors while decreasing the antisocial behaviors [2]. Empathy plays an essential role in prosocial behaviors and social competence [5]. There were two types of parental control, behavioral and psychological [2]. Behavioral control is when parents may regulate or supervise their children’s behaviors, and a high level of understanding of their children’s ideas is related to the decrease of adolescence antisocial behaviors [2]. However, some studies show that antisocial behaviors are still not that clear [6]. Psychological control is when parents want to control children’s thoughts and feelings so that children would have less empathy responses to others in adolescence [2]. Dadds et al. study whether gender differences and age differences affect children’s ability to empathy or not. He found there is no difference in age shown in people’s affective empathy, but their cognitive empathy increased from 4 to 16 years old [6]. Gender differences also appear in these two types of empathy and increase as the ages increase [3]. Empathy related to developmental and abnormal areas. The studies show that one’s capacity to show empathy to others could relate to health or specific mental disorders and personality disorders. There were many developmental and personality disorders associated with the impairment of affective and cognitive empathy; for example, Asperger’s syndrome is the result of the ineffectiveness of one’s cognitive empathy, and narcissistic personality disorder is related to the impairment of affective empathy [3]. Empathy is related to behavior disorders. The research found that people who have disruptive behavior disorders (DBD), including oppositional defiant (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD)-according to DSM-IV, were fewer empathy responses or feelings to others [7]. Empathy sometimes gets confused with sympathy and personal distress. “Personal distress is an aversive reaction, which may consist of feelings of discomfort or anxiety” [7], and sympathy is “an emotional response stemming from the apprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, that is not the same as the other’s state or condition but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other” [5]. Many studies were focused on the parental-child relationship that affects children who have bad behaviors or prosocial behaviors or affects their mental health. Empathy is really important, and it may affect social relationships in school and in social life. In this case, this study aims to analyze old studies to find the relationship between family and empathy, empathy and mental health problems.

## 2. Key definition

There are three key ideas needed to explain and introduce first, prosocial and antisocial behaviors, and also mental disorders associated with empathy. Empathy is related to the low levels of aggression, anger, and uneasiness to be affected by outside problems [1]. People who focus on themselves and do not help others are more likely to have antisocial behaviors. However, some also found empathy is related to prosocial behaviors because people are more likely to understand and help others. Except for these two types of behaviors, some children who have mental disorders have been studied for the association with empathy too.

### 2.1 Prosocial

Prosocial activity means empathy helps people do more beneficial things to other people or things. Prosocial behaviors are prompted by empathy because of altruism, not egoism [1]. For example, if one feels bad or sad when he/she needs to send a dog back to its own country for long travelling and also feels anger that the dog’s owner seems very irresponsible in the plan, this person is experiencing empathy. It could induce some prosocial behaviors because the person feels the dog’s feelings; he/she may spend more time searching the forms, tickets, and other supplements that are needed for international travelling. Experiencing empathy help people trying to do more to decrease the chances of bad things happen-an altruism. Researchers also found that people who have positive mood are more likely to help others, which make them more likely to maintain their positive emotions [1]. However, sometimes feeling bad or negative emotions may not induce some positive behaviors. Some

researchers found that a positive mood could enhance prosocial behaviors, and people who have negative emotions are more focused on themselves instead of others, which means they cannot or do not want to feel other people's emotional states [1]. Recent research found that people's emotional states and behaviors were related to the environment or external factors like "perceived injustice" and that there was a positive relationship: people who perceived injustice were more likely to have anger, aggression, or a negative mood [1]. If people perceive it from the outside as not that good, they might think in a similar way about why they need to treat people well. Thus, children who experience more angry moods from outside tend to have antisocial behaviors, another idea induced by empathy.

## 2.2 Antisocial

Empathy plays an important role in children as they may have low awareness of others' feelings and emotions, which is related to other issue-antisocial behaviors [4]. Antisocial or externalizing behaviors refer to "threatening, attacking, and fighting" and can even refer to "general disobedience and serious conduct disorders" [4]. People who have low levels of empathy are more likely to have antisocial personality disorders [4]. They cannot feel how other people feel and even do not care about how other people think. They are more like to focus on their own feelings that they want to do bad things to feel happy or even to do good things just because they want, which is more like egoism. To be more specific, their ability to "share" other people's feelings has been prohibited, so they cannot feel others' negative feelings that do not want to help others, even do more aggressive things to people. The researchers found that individuals who have antisocial behaviors also have problems expressing empathetic responses [8], which seems like there an interconnected relationship exists.

## 2.3 Mental Health Disease: DBD

The empirical findings showed that DBD children have less empathy and more aggression than normal children [7]. Researchers used questionnaires to measure other types of empathy but to represent the relationship between aggression and cognitive/affective empathy [7], which cannot be too representative or valid since the test subjects are different from the conclusion. There is one research focus on only boys: for boys, their negative emotions of empathy related to prosocial activities, and they have aggressive behaviors when they have more positive emotions [7]. For example, teachers rated boys who have negative emotions like sadness and anger are more likely to help others, but boys who were rated with happiness are more aggressive in the class [7]. It is kind of abnormal and surprising to have this conclusion, but it makes sense at some point that people who have negative feelings much easier to feel other people's emotional states, which makes them want to help others, and people who have aggressive behaviors know they need to pretend good to outside even though they may hard to understand others' feelings. This may relate to the mental area, which could provide more information on why people perform aggressively, like results showed that people who have behavioral problems, like DBD, have issues noticing sad feelings [7].

## 3. Analysis

Sanchez et al. did a study on Span for aged 6-12 years old children focusing on cognitive and affective empathy with the relationship between social behaviors, children's low socioeconomic status (SES) – the income level, and family effects [3]. All the participants- children and family- were randomly selected, and only one child per family [3]. Children older than 8 years old were asked to fill out a questionnaire, Basic Empathy Scale-self report (BES-SR), like "My friend's emotions do not affect me much" and "I often become sad when watching sad things on TV or in films" [3]. BES consists of 20 items and uses a five-point Likert scale (1- "strongly disagree" to 5- "strongly agree") to measure cognitive ( $r=0.26$  to  $0.52$ ) and affective empathy ( $r=0.12$  to  $r=0.49$ ) [3]. The score was calculated based on dividing the total score by the number of items. For parents, they used the Basic Empathy Scale-parent report (BES-PR) to measure cognitive ( $r=0.18$  to  $0.56$ ) and affective empathy ( $r=0.20$  to  $0.52$ ) [3]. The example items are "Other people's feelings do not bother her/him at all" and

“Her/his parents’ or siblings’ emotions do not affect her/him much” [3]. For parents, except on five Likert scales, they have one extra choice, “Not Applicable”, in the case they cannot observe their kids for some reason [3]. Researchers also tested overall scores of dissatisfactions with siblings [3]. The social behaviors were measured based on parents’ and teachers’ responses to social skills and aggressive scales, which are selected from “the Behavior Assessment System for Children” [3]. It tested the frequency (1-never to 4- almost always) of how children rated the interaction with peers and adults as well as the extent of verbal aggression. The correlation coefficients (“0.88 for social skills and 0.91 for aggression”) show that BES-SR was not significant in the relationship of the family environment with empathy [3]. Specifically, to say, a higher score on BES-SR of cognitive empathy, greater satisfaction with the family environment, and higher affective empathy related to higher SES [3]. BES-PR results showed higher cognitive and affective empathy related to higher SES and higher satisfaction of family [3], which means children’s social skills do related to the parents and family environment. As age increases, cognitive empathy may increase, too [3]. People scored higher on the empathy self-report test when the emotional state was related to close relationships compared to unknown people [3]. People are more likely to help close friends with whom they talk more, spend more time, and truly want to alleviate the situations friends are in. Except for age influences the family-empathy relationship, gender may be another factor, but the relationship between gender and empathy is not clear and needs further study [3].

The self-report used to test empathy is not that significant compared to the experimental design, however [4]. There is one longitudinal study that aimed to find individual differences in parental expressiveness. Children could imitate the way their parents express their emotions and feelings [4], and kids often learn things quicker than adults, especially during childhood. It provided some reasons for gender differences in empathy, which is more like a feminine trait, so boy or men seems not encouraged to express this feeling [4] or even to hide it, and after a long time, they may forget or ignore on purpose this feeling of empathy. To test the index of empathy for a large sample, there was a Griffith Empathy Measure (GEM)- a 23-item measure based on a nine-point Likert scale- to be used in the study over 7 years [6]. There was one study in Amsterdam with participants aged from 8 to 13 years old children who have antisocial behaviors or are always absent from classes [8]. The results showed that antisocial behaviors might cause by accepting fewer effective responses [8]. Nonfunctional affective empathy and functional cognitive empathy affect children’s future risk of crime, which is more serious than normal antisocial behaviors [8]. However, if people have behavioral problems, which already affect how they feel or how they understand themselves and others’ feelings, they may have worse scores on the scales testing antisocial behaviors. One study wanted to know DBD children how they show empathic responses to sadness, anger, and fear [7]. In this study, only boys (aged 8 to 12) who were ODD or CD participated because researchers think DBD is more popular in boys rather than girls [7]. All participants’ parents and teachers needed to fill out the Child Behavior Checklist and teachers’ report [7]. Researchers also used Empathy Continuum scores to find the affective empathy or the cognitive empathy related to DBD children’s behaviors. DBD children have a lower level of empathy may be because their mental negative attitude and thoughts toward relationships made them not want to show empathy [7]. They feel a relationship is bad, sad, or any other negative thoughts most time, so they assume people are bad and do not want to feel or understand other people’s emotional states even though this is normal and easy for others who do not have DBD. They found that teacher/parent controls were not associated with sympathy. Milena et al. said that affective empathy inhibits aggression [9]. However, fewer studies were focused on the positive family environment related to the relationship between empathy and aggression [9]. Thus Milena et al. wanted to figure out does family and school can improve or change the relationship between empathy and aggression [9]. They used Interpersonal Reactivity Index-questions are like “you sometimes try to understand your friends better by imagining how they think about things”- to show the internal perspectives of empathy [9]. However, this study is not that good because this questionnaire or the index is not related to the parents or teachers, which means it cannot represent how parents/schools influence children’s levels of empathy, especially since they only used 6 items

scale to ask parents and 5 items for teachers [9]. The items are not enough for a study, and the results are not valid.

#### **4. Discussion**

As more cognitive studies, researchers found that an empathic response can change to sympathetic or personal distress once. The development of empathy is more likely to happen in a family that encourages children to interact with others' emotional states, express their own emotions, and discourage excessive self-concern [4]. Parents or family do play an essential role in the development of empathy that provide the chance for children to express their feelings, no matter if it is anger, sadness, happiness, or love. These children could spend more time experiencing empathy. During their childhood, they could hear their parents say, "oh, I hurt my fingers", which is an example of giving children a chance to "feel" their parents' feelings and emotions – a useful daily lesson for them. Based on those researchers' findings, assume that if children live in a family environment where their parents know how to express their feelings to them, they may show higher levels of empathy in the adolescence stage. Parents' warmth and the way they express their emotions influence children a lot. A higher level of empathy could help children to put themselves in other people's emotional states to try to know more stories or things that happened to others in case to help others' situations. Especially say they may engage in less aggressive or threatening activities and in a more prosocial behavior environment. The warmth of parents and their expressivity represent their "supportive, affectionate, and sensitive to the child's needs" and satisfy their kids. These all give children a chance to grow positively since they have a secure attachment and feel more comfortable in the environment [4]. Secure attachment relationships would enable children to express their emotions confidently and would be willing to share their thoughts and feelings with their parents or even friends later. Empathy children could notice others' feelings, which means if they want to do some harmful things, they may think about what it would bring to others if they really did. Based on these thoughts, their negative behaviors may be inhibited. However, those people who do not perceive positive emotional expressivity during childhood may perform differently in that they seem more indifferent to others or things, more serious, or aggressive to unsatisfied results. In other words, they may have a lower level of self-control and have antisocial behaviors. Parents who are warmer and support their children can improve the development of cognitive empathy [9]. Another "results indicate that the mother's rearing behaviors, attitudes, and mental health status had a significant impact on the childhood empathy development" [10]. Family, or a positive environment, do help children grow well and develop positive empathetic responses. One special case exists, children who have DBD mental problems seem "normal" to cannot feel others' feelings since their systems do not allow that and so they are more likely to perform antisocial things.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Based on the former studies, it can be assumed children's ability to show empathy does related to the family environments and different experiences in childhood induced antisocial or prosocial behaviors in adolescence, except for one special case of those DBD children who have impairment of the emotional system. There are some limitations in this study. The relationship between empathy and prosocial/antisocial behaviors is not that clear even after these years that there are not many researchers focused on this or really did some studies on these specific relationships, maybe because it is hard to have a longitude study and specially to observe so many subject's lives experience for several years. It is hard to notice whether the subjects show positive or negative behaviors after they grow up, especially since most of the research focuses on antisocial studies, and they all used different questionnaires, self-reports, or other items that seem like the questionnaire is not so valid for different tests. It seems like most researchers mentioned antisocial rather than prosocial, so in the future need to change the direction to the prosocial-empathy relationship.

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