

## From the Executive Director: Empathy, Misbehavior, and Developing a Conscience

By David Streight

Nancy Eisenberg's article on helping children develop their natural tendencies for empathy touches on issues addressed in three or four of my pieces in this column in the past five years. Though the columns in question have addressed empathy in a variety of ways, the thread is the same: there are actions—easily accomplished actions—we can take in our schools that can help children grow up with a disposition to be aware of others and sensitive to their needs.

The “king” of empathy studies and translating them to the public is Martin Hoffman, whose book *Empathy and Moral Development* (Cambridge, 2000) is a valuable resource for educators and parents alike. Certainly Hoffman would agree with Nancy Eisenberg's eight suggestions in this newsletter (he cites her research at several points in his book), but the action he clearly stresses above others entails pointing out the consequences of actions and trying to understand others' feelings.

All of the scholars, researchers, and moral development trainers on CSEE's National Advisory Board for Moral Development have emphasized this same point in their writing, both for us and elsewhere. We can help children develop their natural capacity for empathy, even—and especially—when we are correcting misbehavior.

The procedure is simple, though a little practice helps: Teddy kicks a ball in the gym and it hits Maria. The adult who witnesses the action (or who even just hears about it) shows concern for Maria, then points out to Teddy what happened because of his actions, and helps him note her hurt, her fear. The key ingredient is that one child begins to understand better another's perspective (i.e., “How do you think she is feeling right now?”); this ingredient is accompanied by his recognition of his responsibility for causing the other's pain.

Although Hoffman does not stress a following step, when the action in question did indeed cause harm, or could have caused harm, a number of experts point to the value of encouraging the child to make up for the damage in some way. In some cases, an apology suffices. In others, perhaps more is called for. When we ask Teddy to think about what he might do to make up for how he hurt Maria, we are performing a much greater service than just a disciplinary one, though, since the action taken will be his (assuming he suggests something basically appropriate). He will thus leave this encounter with a reminder of how others feel or might feel as the result of his actions, and with the knowledge that an adult trusted his competence sufficiently to allow for his input into how this matter should be handled.

When treated this way, children leave disciplinary situations more disposed toward being empathic, and more capable of seeing others' perspectives. The whole school community is better for it. ■