Valerie Quann
and
Carol Anne Wien

The Visible Empathy of Infants and Toddlers

Katherine, eight months old, sits on the carpet in the middle of a bustling child care room. She has been mesmerized by a pop-up toy but glances up during her play and seems frightened by the commotion around her. Brandon, 19 months old, who sits nearby, notices her change in mood. Katherine begins to cry. Brandon toddles toward her and gently leans over to whisper in her ear. He babbles to her in an unmistakable "motherese" tone, seeming to convey "Don't worry" while also gently patting her hand. He comforts her in the same way the teachers comfort the children.

DO INFANTS AND TODDLERS REALLY SHOW EMPATHY?

What does it look like? Can empathy be documented in very young children who have limited language skills? Can educators discern any factors that enable empathy to develop in infants and toddlers? The purpose of this article is to invite conversation between practitioners, teacher educators, and scholars on empathy in young children. We write the article as teacher educators whose work involves training early childhood educators and elementary teachers. We describe what Quann observed in a multiage

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setting, what we make of these observations grounded in qualitative research, and our reflections. We do not try to tell others what to do, but rather we ask, What do you think about the possibility of the very young in your setting showing empathy? Do other practitioners see anything like these episodes? What do empathy researchers think about what we are seeing?

The setting

Quann had worked in an urban child care environment in which 58 children from three months to six years of age are organized into four classrooms, one of which is multiage. The program, a lab school in a university setting, served an ethnically diverse population with many families from professional backgrounds. In her work, Quann had noticed that very young children seemed fine-tuned to one another's feelings and able to put themselves in the position of others long before researchers in moral reasoning expect to observe empathy (Piaget [1932] 1965; Kohlberg 1969, 1984; Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer 1983; Damon 1988).

Definitions of empathy

We define empathy in very young children as the capacity to observe the feelings of another and to respond with care and concern for that other, noting Hendrick's definition of empathy as "kindness toward another when there is a perceived or real sadness about that person. This [showing kindness] is a difficult task because young children are essentially centered on themselves and have great difficulty grasping how others feel" (1998, 223). We argue, in contrast, that teachers do see remarkable incidents of empathy among very young children. Noddings

(1984, 30) offers the notion of empathy as "feeling *with*" the other; we agree that there is a mutuality of feeling offered by one person to another.

We acknowledge the psychological literature on empathy, altruism, and prosocial development (Eisenberg 1982, 1986, 1992; Hoffman 1982, 2000; Damon 1988; Sroufe 1996; Braten 1998; Denham 1998) and offer our teacher research as a counterpoint that shows what practitioners observe and experience. In doing so, we recall Malaguzzi describing how Reggio educators believe that learning about children could happen first and foremost from observing children themselves: "Indeed, education without research or innovation is education without interest" (Malaguzzi 1998, 73). We want to ask what others think about what we have found.

Pedagogical documentation

Pedagogical documentation is a form of teacher research inspired by the educators of Reggio Emilia. It uses photographs of children at work, samples of their efforts, and text—children's conversations, teachers' thoughts—to show to those outside of classrooms the intriguing events occurring inside classrooms for young children (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999; Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky 2001; Cadwell 2003). We felt that by documenting these events for those outside classroom life we could show the empathy of infants and toddlers. These are episodes so evanescent that their duration is a matter of seconds or minutes; they are events that can be missed altogether if adults are not alert to them.

At the lab school where she had worked, Quann observed the infant/toddler classroom (8 children, ages six months to two-and-a-half years old) and the multiage group (13 children, ages two-and-a-half to four years old), which joined together for substantial parts of the day on nine occasions over 10 weeks. Each observation lasted about three hours. Watching for episodes of empathy, she photographed and took careful notes when discerning an event that seemed to fit our definition. She documented 13 episodes, from a brief flashing moment to an extended period of several minutes. Quann made seven sets of documentation panels with photographs and descriptions to share with the classroom teachers in a collaborative reflection on what was occurring. Here is what she found.

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Three forms of empathy

We saw three types of empathy in the pedagogical documentation. *Proximal empathy* occurs when a child shows concerned care for a distressed classmate who is close by, though not having been involved in the classmate's upset. *Altruistic empathy* occurs when a child offers concerned care in response to another child's suffering by noticing it from afar. *Self-corrective empathy* occurs when a child offers concerned care in response to his or her own actions causing distress to another.

Proximal empathy

In a show of proximal empathy a child responds with care and concern to a nearby child who is hurt. In Quann's observations, this usually occurred when two children were playing in a learning center together. The responding child did not cause nor have anything to do with the other child's being hurt or upset, but was nearby and decided to help in his or her own way, usually with kind words or touching. The following is an example of proximal empathy.

The difficulty of scissors. Destiny (23 months) and Pratha (20 months) play in the creative area, attempting to make scissors cut paper. Destiny, who has not had much experience using scissors, struggles to hold them. As she struggles, her index finger bends backward and she begins to cry. Pratha says, "Ouch," and touches Destiny's hand. Pratha then looks up, presumably for a teacher. Teacher Leona comes over with ice and comforts Destiny. Pratha stands nearby with a concerned look on her face.

In proximal empathy, a child becomes aware of and responds to another child's suffering because they are close by. In this instance, Pratha seems to "feel with" Destiny, acknowledging her hurt and wanting her to feel better.

It seems that some children become upset when other children are visibly upset. Our inference is that even infants and toddlers "catch" the feeling of distress and respond, perhaps because of their relationship with the upset child, perhaps out of shared knowledge of what it feels like to be upset, or perhaps out of a global emotional tone for the situation. It is as if the child who witnesses the hurt wants to communicate her acknowledgment of the hurt.

Ice will make it better. Wyatt (two-and-a-half years) has fallen on the carpet, and it quickly becomes clear that he is injured. A teacher comforts him. Amanda (17 months) goes to the small fridge in the room and retrieves an ice pack. She brings it over to Wyatt. Her face says, "There," as she puts the ice beside him and "All better now" as she turns and walks away. She is smiling.

Many children in this classroom attempt to show care for their upset peers by bringing them ice. Perhaps the children remember that when they were hurt, the teachers brought them ice and then they felt better. Once, a child brought another child ice when he was crying due to morning separation from his parent. The upset child accepted the ice and, very soon after, stopped crying. In this environment, it was as if ice represents a gift of caring, of compassion: to be offered ice is to be healed.

Altruistic empathy

In altruistic empathy, a child notices distress from much further away, when involved in a different activity that might preclude attention to the distress of another. In altruistic empathy, there seems to be attunement to the distress of others and a concerted desire to assuage it.

Offering objects as comfort. Matthew (22 months) is out of sorts today, crying at the gate at the classroom door, wanting to leave (presumably to go after his mother, who left about an hour earlier). Two teachers have tried to comfort and distract him, but he remains upset. Amanda (17 months) brings him several trains; everyone knows they are his favorite toy. He throws them over the gate. One teacher successfully redirects him to a puzzle. Later, the other teacher picks up the trains and returns them to their bin.

Amanda peers into the bins. She looks around the room, and when she sees Matthew, her face lights up. She brings the trains over and silently puts them on the table beside him. Colin (17 months) walks by the table, picks up the trains, and walks away. Matthew cries out and begins to chase Colin. He moves to a corner, crying loudly, and throws several toys. He has a large bell in his hand as Amanda approaches with another train she has found; she offers it to him. He puts the bell down, takes the train, and sits on the carpet, holding it. Amanda returns to reading books with Emma and a student teacher. Matthew puts down the train, goes to a bookshelf, picks out a book, and joins them. He is much happier for the rest of the morning.

As the teachers notice when reviewing the documentation panel with Quann, Amanda's solution is more fine-tuned than their own: she "knows" exactly what will please Matthew—his favorite toy. When Colin walks off with her offer of comfort, Matthew becomes enraged and loses all control. Amanda hangs in, finding another train and offering it once again. It is as if she assures Matthew that he

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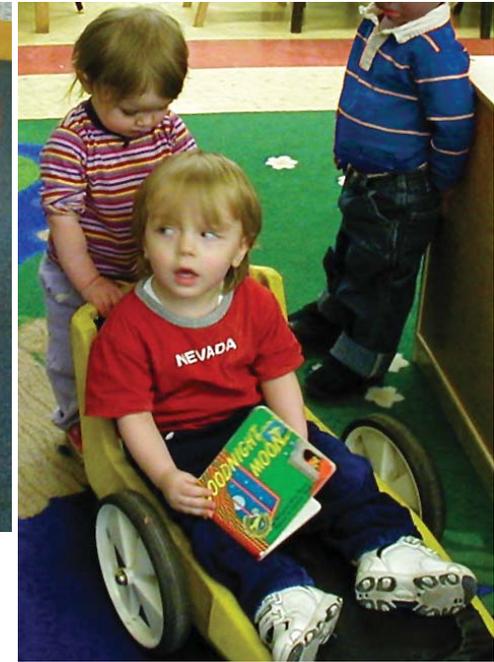
will be comforted, as if she has a sort of persistence in seeing him through his upset. We might infer that while the teachers clearly make many different attempts to console this child, a young child in their midst joins them and also makes repeated attempts. Altruistic empathy is kindness in which a child interrupts her own activity and goes out of her way to be kind.

Extended altruistic empathy

A single child reacted in a thoughtful and striking manner toward another's hurt when a roomful of other children did not notice the problem. Amanda displayed empathy for other children's suffering when she was not only not involved in the cause but was often busy playing in another part of the room. If she noticed that another child "needed care" of some kind, she would often leave what she was doing to go to that child and offer help.

The symbiotic relationship between helping and being helped. Wyatt sits in a low, wheeled cart for mobility after he has broken his leg. Wyatt tries to maneuver around the room, but his cart gets stuck on the leg of the sand table. Amanda is on the other side of the room reading a book. She glances up and notices Wyatt gesturing and making sounds. She leaves her book on the carpet and walks over to Wyatt. She leans over and looks in his eyes. It looks like she is saying, "Don't worry, we'll figure this out." Wyatt smiles at her.

Amanda tries to move the cart back and forth but cannot make it move. She tries to push the book shelf on the other side of the cart, but it is too heavy. Then she tries to push the sand table aside and is successful. Wyatt points to the bookshelf and Amanda moves his cart in that direction. Wyatt uses his hands to move the wheels on his chair so Amanda needs to help him only minimally. Together the children move to the bookshelf.

Amanda waits while Wyatt searches the shelf. He chooses *Goodnight Moon* **but cannot quite reach it. Amanda waits, as if to see if he can reach it. When she realizes that he cannot, she moves the book closer to him so that he can grasp it on his own. Wyatt takes the book but looks distressed when he realizes that he cannot move his wheels with the book in his hand. He looks at Amanda and she accepts the book from him. Wyatt points to the carpet area, indicating that he would like to go there. Amanda holds the book in her hand and pushes Wyatt to the carpet area. She smiles and goes back to her spot on the carpet.**

Amanda is a mere 17 months old. She shows what we consider a deep sense of empathy, in that she seems to put herself in the place of others, to grasp their needs, even when she is not directly involved in the situation. In the midst of another activity, she spots others in need. As we watch her reactions while helping, her smiles and appearance of satisfaction, we infer helping others in need is deeply satisfying to her.

Self-corrective empathy

Self-corrective empathy occurs when a child is the cause of another child's hurt feelings or injury. In response to the resulting suffering, the perpetrator shows empathy toward the hurt child. The following example shows how this works.
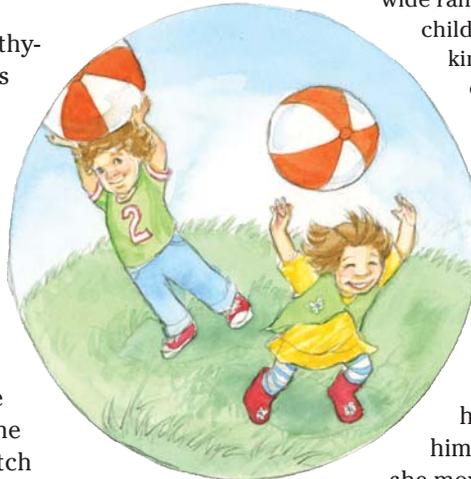
Empathy for hurt feelings. Michael, a preschooler, is putting spools on a string to make a necklace. He is quietly working alone when Amanda approaches and starts to play with the end of his string. With her other hand, she reaches for a red wooden ring. Michael yells, "No! Go away." He pulls the string out of Amanda's

hands. Amanda's face crumples, as though she might cry, yet she still tries to grab the string. Michael then puts some beads near her and says, "Here, these are for you." They work silently, with Amanda watching Michael string his spools onto the string as she does the same. He glances over at her and notices her watching him. He smiles and says, "Look, you're doing it."

Michael first reacts harshly, protecting his activity from interference. When he sees Amanda start to cry, he stops and seems to rethink his reaction. In fact, he changes his response from a harsh rejection to an offer of material that enables Amanda to join his activity. We believe that this is a sophisticated empathic behavior. Michael reacts egocentrically initially, protecting something he sees as his. Yet, following Amanda's hurt, nonverbal reaction, he invites her into his activity. Essentially, he switches his mind-set from exclusion to inclusion. We think this a profoundly moving response, for even in adulthood it is difficult to change one's behavior midstream to be more tolerant, more inclusive.

Hoffman (2000) discusses empathy-based guilt, a painful feeling of loss of esteem for oneself, "usually accompanied by a sense of urgency, tension, and regret that results from empathic feeling for someone in distress, combined with awareness of being the cause of that distress" (p. 114). We are not sure we want to infer that children so young are reacting out of guilt: what is clear is the successful switch in response in the midst of emotion. We find this switch powerful, because it suggests that positive care for others is strong enough to stop one's negative reaction to another person.

Hoffman noted in his research that in their second year, children show "more aggression and more pleasure in the victim's distress when they caused the other's distress than when they witnessed it. . . . In any case, causing another's distress is more likely to require adult intervention than witnessing another's distress" (2000, 136). Michael's reaction is even more surprising, given Hoffman's suggestion that episodes such as this generally require adult intervention. Michael, a preschooler, was able to regulate his own behavior and did not require adult intervention. We consider his response a highly sophisticated communication.

Discussion and reflections

When Quann discussed these episodes with the classroom teachers, Kathleen and Leona, the teachers felt that Amanda's behavior was altruistic—in their view, offered without a notion of gain for herself. Kathleen said, "[Amanda] seems to be completely empathic in an altruistic sense. . . . She's not trying to make up for something she's done or make it better when she's hurt somebody."

Damon (1988) argues:

Newborns have the capacity for some purely affective empathic responses. These early feelings become the emotional cornerstone of prosocial behaviour. But for effective moral action, the child must learn to identify a wide range of emotional states in others. Further, the child must acquire the ability to anticipate what kinds of action will improve the emotional state of the other. (p. 15)

What is so striking about Amanda's day-to-day behavior is that she *does* seem to have what Damon calls *effective moral action*. Amanda displayed this knowledge especially well in the episode with Wyatt and his cart. She seemed to know intuitively that Wyatt needed only a small bit of help to meet his needs. Some adults might have taken over, pushing him where he needed to go and retrieving the book for him. But Amanda offered him scaffolded support; she moved the book over just so far so that Wyatt could reach it. She allowed him to push his cart with his hands on the wheels, and she pushed only that small amount extra that enabled him to be successful. Her actions imply that she understood the wide range of emotional states that Damon discusses: she seems to understand Wyatt's need to participate and also the limits of his ability to do so.

It is legitimate to ask whether Amanda is too empathic, interrupting her own activity to offer care to others. Quann struggled with this, thinking she didn't want Amanda to stop being empathic, yet didn't want her needs to be forgotten either. Hoffman (2000) argues that it can be typical in later schooling for girls who are very agreeable to have their needs overlooked for others who seem needier. Wien argues that Amanda's successful acts to restore positive emotion in others do in fact satisfy a need in her—perhaps for harmony of relations or for restoring others to equanimity—and that her success supports her

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sense of personal power and efficacy, as seen by her smiles, even though she is not yet 20 months old. Batson and Shaw (1991) would seem to agree with Wien's interpretations of these events:

> Altruism and egoism . . . have much in common. Each refers to goal-directed motivation; each is concerned with the ultimate goal of this motivation; and for each, the ultimate goal is increasing someone's welfare. These common features provide the context for highlighting the crucial difference: Whose welfare is the ultimate goal—another person's or one's own? (p. 108)

How is empathy generated? What conditions encourage empathy for others? The explanation for the empathy shown by the children in this child care setting, we believe, is the high quality of adult-child relationships and interactions modeled by the teachers and adult family members. This school holds relationships at the heart of its program. Forming and sustaining positive relationships is the first priority, as teachers engage children in meaningful ways and form authentic, lasting relationships with families. Leona said, "You have to work hard at a real relationship with the family. If there are problems, we work at them. Hard. We respect differences in parenting styles. You could be working with this family for five years. It's a real relationship and we need to treat it like that."

Eisenberg (1992) comments, "It seems obvious that teachers and peers must influence children's prosocial development. Once children enter school, they spend a large amount of time with teachers and friends" (p. 112). In a child care setting, children can spend up to 10 hours a day together. This is bound to affect their behavior in terms of learning from what they see and experience.

The teachers in this room said they strongly believed in using appropriate, positive language. Kathleen also felt that the children learned much through modeling. Leona agreed that the children saw others acting and reacting in a particular way and then learned from that observation. Leona helped children negotiate their boundaries by encouraging them to verbalize their feelings through language. Both teachers would guide less verbal children

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by providing them with appropriate language choices, saying such things as, "You are crying. That looks like it really hurt when you were pushed. What could you say to Aidan?" If the child was not verbal, the teacher would continue, "You could try saying 'Stop' or 'That hurts'."

The teachers also recognized the importance of nonverbal communication. They taught the children American Sign Language signs for *stop*, *help*, and *more*, among other needs, to enhance their independence and to help them feel more self-control during peer interactions. In addition, surrounding the teachers' positive language was an aura of emotional regard for every participant in the setting—children, teachers, and families. This aura of emotional support included body language, voice tone and inflection, and a stance of caring that becomes infectious and is caught by others in the setting.

Implications for educators and administrators

We believe the relationship between teachers and children is the most important factor influencing how children act within any type of early learning center. Without the high-quality relationships that Quann observed, we suspect little empathy would have occurred in this setting. What we saw suggests three ways in particular that teachers and administrators might encourage children to be empathic.

Create a culture of caring

The teachers Quann observed always spoke in an authentic way, using natural language in a conversational manner, with respect for each child, engaging the children and responding to their needs. When children observe teachers and older children behaving in this way, they catch the feeling and also pass it on. Helping children understand the feelings of others is an integral aspect of the curriculum of living together. The relationships among teachers, between children and teachers, and among children are fostered with warm and caring interactions.

A child cannot be spoiled by being loved and respected or by learning how to love and respect others.

Document prosocial behavior

Closely observing the children and forming documentation panels greatly helped Quann's understanding of what was occurring in the classroom. After each panel was created, Quann met with the teachers to reflect on what had occurred. This always brought out rich discussion and

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deeper reflection on the classroom experience. Then the panels were posted so that the children could observe and revisit their experiences with help from the teachers. When teachers carefully observe children for empathy and other positive social-emotional behaviors, and document those behaviors for others to see, they highlight the importance of constructing positive socioemotional spaces for living. In uncertain and turbulent times, we consider such values a basic right and necessity for children.

Allow unhurried time

The episode in which Amanda helped Wyatt navigate between his needs and his limits in their early childhood setting is an example of the benefits that occur when teachers allow expansive time frames for activity. When Wyatt was first stuck at the sand table, a teacher could have just reached over and tapped the table aside so that he could get though. However, the teachers waited, to observe what might occur.

Amanda came quickly to Wyatt's aid and gave him the help he needed to move throughout the room. Wyatt was empowered to move himself with a small amount of help, and Amanda was allowed to practice empathic behavior. It is this type of keen observation and respectful interaction that permits children higher degrees of participation in deciding what to do and allows teachers to see the remarkable empathic reciprocity that even infants and toddlers seem capable of showing.

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