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The Development of Empathy in Children-Innate or Learned?

Empathy has been defined as the identification with and understanding of another person's situation feelings, and motives. The affective interpretation of empathy is where the perception of an emotional gesture in another directly activates the same emotion in the perceiver" (Lipps 1903). Current cognitive models suggest that empathy is a perspective taking process where one uses processes of imagination or projection to put oneself in the place of another. The present study examined whether these processes are innate or learned. The ability to build empathy skills was examined in 18 children ranging in age from 4-7. Self-report measures were given to each child. Each child was then read an empathic situational story. The experimental group was given a definition of empathy and taught how to approach the situational stories in an empathic fashion. The control group was read the stories with no discussion afterwards. Both groups showed improvement in the follow up self-report measures. The experimental group demonstrated additional improvement indicating that empathy can be manipulated.