

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY: WHY IT'S IMPORTANT?

Yudho Bawono¹, Wasis Purwo Wibowo², Ar Liza Listiyana³,
Samsul Muarif⁴, Puji Restu Aditiya⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5}Psychology Study Program, Universitas Trunojoyo Madura
Jl. Raya Telang PO Box 2 Kamal, Bangkalan-Madura, East Java 69162, Indonesia
yudho.bawono@trunojoyo.ac.id

ABSTRACT

A number of literature states that the ability to empathize has a positive impact on children's behavior towards other people, supports social relationships, and increases interactions in the surrounding environment. However, various forms of violence and conflict that have occurred recently are considered to be the result of a lack of culture of empathy in Indonesian society. The literature also shows that most people are no longer willing to try to understand feelings and put themselves in other people's shoes. Acts of violence occur everywhere. This happens because today's culture of empathy in society has almost disappeared. This research aims to find out more about the results of previous studies which discuss the importance of understanding empathy, especially in children. By knowing the importance of understanding empathy in everyday life, it is hoped that empathy skills can be taught from an early age. Narrative literature review was used as the methodology in this research.

Keywords: empathy, narrative literature review

ABSTRAK

Sejumlah literatur menyebutkan bahwa kemampuan berempati berdampak positif pada perilaku anak terhadap orang lain, menunjang hubungan sosial, dan meningkatkan interaksi dengan lingkungan sekitar. Namun berbagai bentuk kekerasan dan konflik yang terjadi akhir-akhir ini dinilai merupakan akibat dari kurangnya budaya empati masyarakat Indonesia. Literatur juga menunjukkan bahwa kebanyakan orang tidak lagi mau mencoba memahami perasaan dan menempatkan diri pada posisi orang lain. Aksi kekerasan terjadi dimana-mana. Hal ini terjadi karena budaya empati di masyarakat saat ini sudah hampir hilang. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui lebih lanjut hasil penelitian sebelumnya yang membahas tentang pentingnya pemahaman empati khususnya pada anak. Dengan mengetahui pentingnya memahami empati dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, diharapkan keterampilan empati dapat diajarkan sejak dini. Tinjauan literatur naratif digunakan sebagai metodologi dalam penelitian ini.

Kata Kunci: empati, tinjauan literatur naratif

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, news about the lack of empathy in society has become increasingly common. Recent studies even show that empathy in humans is becoming increasingly rare. Currently, around 65% of people are indifferent or have lost their sense of empathy (Frizona & Rossa, 2019). What is more worrying is that at the elementary school education level, the phenomenon of low empathy in children is found, which can be seen from feeling happy when they see other people having difficulties and not feeling guilty when they hurt other people, both physically and emotionally (Haryani, 2013).

This condition is worrying because according to Fidrayani (2022) if someone no longer has a sense of empathy, someone will tend to have despicable attitudes such as being arrogant, not caring, not being sensitive to their surroundings and closing themselves off. When someone has closed themselves and their hearts, then someone may not feel feelings for themselves. This will have an impact on someone who will not be able to feel or even understand the feelings of other people in the surrounding environment.

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This increasingly waning sense of empathy is influenced by various factors, one of which is the ease with which technology can be accessed in people's lives through mass media which has a negative impact. Information about videos, broadcasts, messages via FB, WA, Twitter, Instagram and others is very easy to provide to people wherever they are. If the information provided shows a lot of pornographic videos, violence, cursing, insults, aggressiveness and so on (Sukmawati, 2017).

This fading of empathy can actually be minimized because this empathetic ability can be taught from an early age. According to Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory (2014) empathy has been present since infancy, even in simple forms such as babies laughing when they see people laughing. The development of empathy, from arousal to internalization, is a complex process. As you get older, your ability to empathize gets better. This is characterized by an increasing ability to realize and understand other people's feelings (Hoffman, 2000).

Children's empathy abilities will continue to develop, but the level of development will not be the same for every human being. Thus, it is necessary to understand the ability to empathize with oneself and others. This understanding is important because by empathizing, children are taught not to be selfish, to be able to imagine what other people and themselves are experiencing and also feel what that person is experiencing. This research was conducted using a narrative literature review method which examined the results of previous research related to empathy and elementary school-aged children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of empathy

Goleman (2011) defines empathy as an individual's ability to understand other people's feelings, feel what other people feel and provide a compassionate response to that person's distress. Empathy is a person's ability to be able to put oneself in another person's position, see events from another person's perspective, understand other people's feelings correctly and be able to express the situation that person is experiencing (Dokmen in Steffgen, Konig, Pfetsch & Melzer, 2011).

Furthermore, empathy can also be defined as the ability to feel or imagine another person's emotional experience. The ability to empathize is an important part of social and emotional development, influencing an individual's behavior towards others and the quality of social relationships. Empathy is closely related to prosocial behavior, children who are trained to develop empathy from a young age will have good social relationships and interactions (Fidrayani, 2015).

Aspects of empathy

According to Davis (1980) empathy consists of four aspects. These four aspects include:

1. Perspective taking. It is a tendency to take or adopt other people's points of view by placing oneself in situations or conditions experienced by other people. Perspective taking is positively related to emotional reactions and helping behavior in adults.
2. Fantasy. It is a person's tendency to transform themselves into the feelings and actions of imaginary characters found in books, television, or games.
3. Empathic concern. It is a person's orientation tendency towards other people in the form of feelings of sympathy and care for other people who have experienced misfortune. This aspect is positively related to emotional reactions and helping behavior in adults.
4. Personal distress. It is a person's orientation towards himself, including feelings of anxiety and unease in interpersonal situations that are influenced by the discomfort of other people. According to Davis, high personal distress is related to low social functioning. So high levels of personal distress indicate a lack of ability to socialize.

Factors influencing empathic abilities

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Denham (in Nugraha, Apriliya, & Veronicha, 2017) explains that there are nine general factors that can encourage empathic abilities, including:

1. Age, maturity in terms of age will influence a child's ability to empathize, so that the ability to understand other people's perspectives will increase as the child's age increases.
2. Gender, someone will usually be more empathetic to friends who have the same gender because they feel they have more in common.
3. Intelligence, smarter children are usually better able to calm other people because they are better able to understand other people's needs and try to find ways to help solve their problems.
4. Emotional problems, someone who freely expresses emotions is usually better able to understand other people's feelings correctly.
5. Empathetic parents, children imitate their parents' behavior so that empathetic parents will make children more empathetic towards other people.
6. Emotional security, someone who adapts easily tends to like helping others.
7. Temperament, someone who is cheerful and sociable is more able to empathize with children who are stressed.
8. Problems with conditions, usually someone will find it easier to empathize with people who are experiencing the same conditions or experiences.
9. Bonding, someone will more easily empathize with people or friends who are closer to them than those who are not too close.

METHODS

This research was using narrative literature study. The researcher obtained results from research over the last five years (2019-2024) by downloading the full article in Google Scholar database. In browsing for databases, the researcher was using "empathy" and "elementary school-aged children" as keywords.

Based on those literature studies, the researcher was able to obtain 6 kinds of literature which have been selected based on several criteria, such as (1) Study conducted in Indonesia; (2) Study were focusing on empathy; (3) Subjects of the study were elementary school-aged children.

RESULTS

In this study, literature study which conducted by the researcher was presented in tables based on findings of previous research (Table 1).

Table 1. Studies on empathy and elementary age children

Author(s)	Research Purposes	Research Results
Suparmi & Sumijati (2021)	To find the effectiveness of empathy training in improving the prosocial behavior of school-aged children in Semarang	There was a very significant difference between a child's prosocial behavior score before and after attending empathy training ($t = 4,359$; $p = 0,000$). Empathy training effective to improve the prosocial behavior of primary school-aged children
Mulyawati, Marini, & Nafiah (2022)	To determine the effect of empathy on prosocial behavior of elementary school students	There was an effect of empathy on the prosocial behavior of grade 3 students at SDN Cilendek 01 Bogor City in the 2021/2022 academic year. So, to improve students' prosocial behavior, one of them is by improving the empathy of their students

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Fitriyatinur, Agustina, & Amaliyah (2023)	To increase empathy in children from an early age	A significant change based on the empathy training that has been conducted. Children are more able to empathize with their environment
Anggraini (2023)	To foster an empathetic attitude through the literacy program based Siaga Petra game	The application of the literacy program based Siaga Petra game can foster student empathy in grade 1b students in Elementary School of 2 Rejang Lebong
Hilman, Akmal, & Permana (2023)	To determine the effects of ecoliteracy learning	Ecoliteracy learning can also grow and improve students' empathetic attitude towards the environment
Rina Susanti (2024)	To investigate the influence of character education programs on the development of empathy in elementary school students	Character education programs have a positive impact on shaping students' empathy, emphasizing the learning of moral and ethical values. Students' empathy was found to increase through the implementation of programs that emphasize values such as tolerance, cooperation, and caring

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that children's empathy abilities, especially elementary school-aged children, can be improved. Several ways that can be done include implementation of a guidance package to increase empathy based on experiential learning (Andrianie, Ariyanto, & Nawantara, 2017), implementing game-based literacy programs (Anggraini, 2023), ecoliteracy learning (Hilman, et al, 2023), and character education programs (Susanti, 2024).

Once this empathy ability can be improved, this empathy ability can be created in the form of training to improve other abilities, for example prosocial behavior (Fitriyatinur, et al, 2023; Lapanda, Sofia, & Drupadi, 2022; Mulyawati, et al, 2022; Suparmi & Sumijati, 2021; Widiatmoko, 2017). Considering the importance of the ability to empathize in a person's life, it is necessary for individuals to understand their own empathy and the empathy of others. Understanding the importance of empathic abilities can later be used to design forms of training to improve empathic abilities.

CONCLUSION

The ability to empathize has a positive impact on children's behavior towards other people, supports social relationships, and increases interactions in the surrounding environment. This literature review found that the results of previous studies show that empathy skills can be taught through training. By knowing the importance of understanding empathy in everyday life, it is hoped that empathy skills can be taught from an early age.

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