

## Teaching Empathy

*“You can’t understand another person until you walk a few miles in their moccasins.”*

This well-known Native American proverb is a good way to begin the subject of empathy. Guidance Class has been focusing on the teaching of empathy primarily with the Middle School students. Why? The Middle School environment can be the setting for the development of positive character traits but it can also be the setting for the deterioration of such traits. Discovering yourself and what you stand for is part of the work of a middle school student. True, much of the student’s work is academic but not all of it. During the middle school years students have many opportunities to further develop their personalities, enhance their self-worth, cultivate friendships, figure out what they stand for, and find value in all their experiences.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton School would like all of its students to be defined as empathic children. Such children would be able to sense, identify with, and understand what another person is feeling. Empathetic children don’t change another’s feelings but rather, they accept and share them, but in a softer way, because it’s almost impossible to feel with the same intensity of the other person’s firsthand experience. Empathy can be compared to an echo. One doesn’t add to what someone feels. The feelings aren’t changed. The feelings come back to the person, just as the words spoken in an echo come back - only softer.

Empathy involves compassion for others. It involves expressing charity – kindness, benevolence, and goodwill. Empathy brings people together. All children are born with the capacity for empathy but it needs to be nourished to develop and thrive. School and in particular, Middle School is an ideal setting for such development. Adolescence is a time when cognitive and affective abilities combine with social experience to foster a whole new sense of the world as a place where others have feelings, ideas, and needs of the same intensity as one’s own. Such a time can give birth to empathy. SEAS wants to be involved in such development and for that reason, SEAS works hard at providing a safe environment where children can explore and test different feelings and thoughts without fear of being ridiculed or embarrassed.

Of course, this is an imperfect world with imperfect human beings. Consequently, one of the greatest challenges of educators is the promotion of character that fosters the growth of empathy in its students. Often, empathy is mistakenly believed to be rooted in emotion. However, it arises from the cognitive advances made in human development that allow a person to see another person’s unique point of view. Middle School students are challenged to think critically about their own behavior, and that of their peers when it comes to the feelings, needs, and rights of others. With a deeper understanding of what is at stake teens will rise to the occasion and demonstrate true altruism. Empathy is the ladder leading up to this realization.