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Empathy: Friend or Foe?

When a student runs into a problem and you respond with empathy, the child will perceive you as a ally. The opposite of this concept has likely been used on you at one time or another. *I told you this would happen. Why didn't you listen to me? This wouldn't have happened if you had.* You know from experience how ineffective this can be. It merely arouses feelings of defensiveness and anger in the person who has the problem. *What a jerk. He has no idea how I feel or why this happened.* Empathy causes the pain of the consequence to be experienced from the inside. Instead of the child being distracted by thinking about how rude and unfeeling you are, they can focus on their problem, feel regret about the poor choice, repair any damage, and make plans for the future.

Amber came up and told me that Jon had smacked Julie with the paint brush and had gotten paint all over her arm. This was the last thing I needed, it was already a stressful day. Jon was in one of my reading groups with exceptionally responsible kids. *He knows better than this. I expect more of Jon than that.* I wanted to go out to the painting area and reprimand him. But I knew from experience that that kind of approach was usually ineffective. I also knew that I usually make poor decisions I regret later when I'm angry. So I called Jon over when I was a little calmer and asked him to make an appointment with me during one of his recess times.

By the time recess rolled around I was feeling less emotional--more in my thinking state.

"So Jon," I began calmly, "tell me about what happened with the paint brush."

Jon looked a little frustrated. He took a breath and shared, "When you came out and asked us to clean up, I still had a small spot to paint. I was just going to finish real quick, but Julie started to grab the paint tray out of my hand. I told her to stop, but she didn't, so I hit her with the paint brush." He sighed, obviously already not too proud of what he'd chosen to do.

A typical response might be *Jon, she may have grabbed the paint tray, but that's no excuse to hit her with the paint brush. Now you're off paints.*

But Jon was already aware of his inappropriate response, though he was still frustrated with Julie's grabbing. Instead I responded sincerely, "That's pretty frustrating when people grab things out of your hands, huh?" I empathized.

"Yeah. Especially because I was going to clean up in just a minute."

"I see what you mean," I added. I paused a moment just to acknowledge how he felt. Now Jon was with me. He already felt badly about smacking Julie with the paint brush. Since I empathized with him he could now look at his own behavior instead of being distracted by my unfairness in not understanding how he felt. We were ready to do some problem solving now.

"So what are some other things you could have done?"

Jon thought seriously about this and came up with several good alternatives that would have been appropriate, and even came up with one that he discarded, deciding, "No, that wouldn't work." He was really thinking this stuff through. After he came up with these I continued with the consequences which would now be meaningful since I had taken the time to understand him. "So Jon, what would it tell other kids if I just let this go."

"That it's okay to hit people with paint brushes."

"Yeah. That wouldn't work to well for me. You can see that," I indicated that I appreciated him seeing my side now. "So what would make sense as a logical consequence?"

"You could take me off paints for the year." Jon not only could see my side now he could think about rational consequences. "That makes sense, but it's pretty tough. Does that sound like me, taking a kid off paints all year--a responsible kid like you-- for goofing up once."

He chuckled, "No."

"So, how about you're off paints for one day. Then the next day give it a shot again. If you're responsible with the paints then you're on from then on, unless there's another problem," I jested. "With a guy like you I'm sure there won't be."

He nodded. This was reasonable to him.

"Thanks for thinking this through with me. Some great problem solving," I said referring to his ideas for other things he could have done.

Jon walked out feeling good about having thought through his mistake and having come up with some alternatives in case something similar were to come up in the future. Jon's misbehavior became an opportunity for him to explore more appropriate behaviors as well as to have some practice problem solving. He was perhaps better off than if he hadn't screwed up. This is the essence of Love and Logic. Errors and mistakes are only opportunities to learn in disguise. Since I chose to empathize with Jon instead of countering him with

the seemingly reasonable, "That's no excuse," he was able to admit his mistake and profit from examining it. Empathy has the extra bonus of causing the student to feel that the teacher likes him and considers him responsible and capable of making good decisions. More trust is established, which can be useful when future mistakes come up (which you can count on, and even hope for!). By the way, kids who feel liked and think of themselves as responsible will tend to act in responsible ways!