

Empathy is a Powerful Intervention

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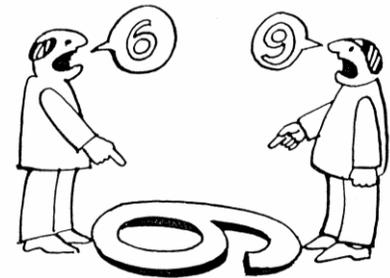
One of the most fundamental interventions to help reduce anxiety, disappointment, and frustration in persons with Prader-Willi syndrome (PWS) is empathy. **Empathy is a powerful and critical intervention for persons with PWS.**

Empathy is the ability to see the perspective of another, to understand the feelings of another.

Most persons with PWS do not possess the skill or ability to see things from another person's perspective. If we don't understand that empathy is a skill deficit in most persons with PWS, we may experience their behavior as argumentative and oppositional. As parents and care providers we must see things from the *individual's* perspective in order to improve our interactions with them, increase the potential for their cooperation, and decrease the potential for any unwanted behaviors.

Empathy is neither agreeing, nor disagreeing, nor giving in; it is simply communicating that you understand the perspective, want, need or concern of the other. How do we do this?

- Get into the mindset of the individual... what does it look like from *their* perspective? Understand their concern *from their perspective*. Don't be afraid to make things worse... genuine empathy does not make things worse!
- Repeat the individual's concern to show you *completely* understand it.
- Once this understanding is achieved and communicated, there is less need for the individual to work harder – get louder or more aggressive – to get you to understand them.
- Only *after* you are *certain* the individual with PWS knows you *completely understand their concern* should you begin to share *your* concern.



Words and Phrases that Express Empathy

At its most basic form an empathetic response is simply and genuinely repeating the *exact* words used by the individual. Words that can convey your empathy or understanding:

- "What a bummer!"
- "What a disappointment."
- "That's not fair!"
- "That sounds just *awful, terrible!*"
- "It sounds like you want xyz. Is that right?"
- "You want xyz. You want xyz. You want xyz."
- "Xyz won't work. No, xyz won't work."
- "You think x. I understand that you think x."

Other Empathy as Intervention Tips

- **Don't try to talk someone out of their upset;** they'll just feel they need to express *more* upset so that you understand. If your initial offer to comfort is not effective, go directly to Empathy.
- **Don't use logic and reasoning,** *especially* when the person is upset or "stuck" on an idea or position. Give up trying to think of brilliant ways to convince the individual that you're right... all they hear is you telling them *they are wrong* which will *increase* their upset. **Use Empathy.**
- **Don't argue. You can't win.** Persons with PWS are not bound as we are to logic which means we will always lose the argument. Use, "You might be right." Rephrase differences: "Interesting thought." "You think x and I think y." **Use Empathy.**
- **Don't engage in a Power Struggle.** Learn when to disengage and let the individual know you will now focus your attention on something else. Disagreements can often be ended if you give the individual with PWS the last word. "I'll make one more comment and then you make one more comment and then let's talk about something else." **Don't say another word!**
- **Use fewer words.** More words do *not* make it better and usually *increase* upset.