



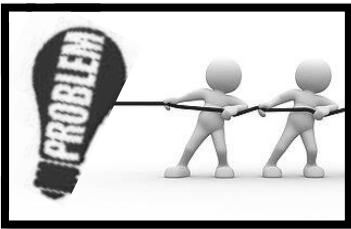
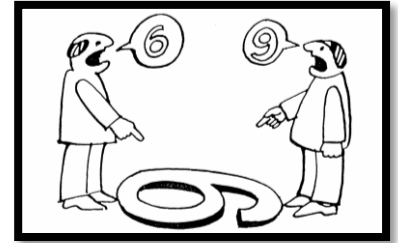
## Empathy is a Powerful Intervention

by Lisa Graziano, M.A., LMFT

One of the most fundamental interventions to help reduce anxiety, disappointment, and frustration and therefore reduce maladaptive behaviors in persons with Prader-Willi syndrome 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, increase the potential for their cooperation, and decrease the potential for unwanted behaviors.



Empathy is not agreeing, disagreeing, or giving in; it is simply communicating that you understand the perspective, want, need, or concern of the other. **Empathy is successful because it gets to the core of anxiety, disappointment, or frustration, moves you out of a power struggle, and puts you and the individual with PWS on the same side.**

### Steps to Using Empathy as an Intervention

At its most basic form an empathetic response is simply and genuinely repeating the *exact* words used by the individual.

1. **Get into the mindset of the individual.** Understand their concern or problem or upset *from their perspective*.
2. **Repeat the individual's concern, problem, or upset** to show you *completely* understand it. Don't be afraid that talking about their upset or repeating their concern will make things worse... genuine empathy *rarely* makes things worse!
3. **Watch for reduced upset and calmer behavior.** Once the individual believes you really *do* understand their concern or problem, there is less need for them to work harder – get louder or more aggressive – to *get* you to understand. Feelings and maladaptive behaviors, therefore, tend to become calmer.
4. **Share your concern.** Only *after* you see less upset and are *certain* the individual with PWS knows you *completely understand their concern or problem* should you begin to share *your* concern.

### Other Words and Phrases that Express Empathy and Understanding

- "What a bummer!"
- "What a disappointment."
- "That sounds just *awful, terrible!*"
- "That's not fair!"
- "It sounds like you want xyz. Is that right?"
- "You think x. I understand that you think x."

### Other Empathy as Intervention Tips

- **Don't try to talk someone out of their upset** because they'll generally feel they need to express *more* upset so that you understand. If your initial offer of comfort is not effective, go directly to Empathy.
- **Don't argue. You can't win.** Instead, try "You might be right"; "That's an interesting thought"; or "You think x and I think y." Give up trying to think of brilliant ways to convince the individual you're right... all they hear is you saying is *they're wrong* which will *increase* their upset. Use Empathy.
- **Logic and reasoning don't work.** Persons with PWS are not bound by logic and reasoning, but you are. This means others will always lose the argument. Use Empathy. Learn when to disengage. Inform the individual you're all finished talking about this issue and 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." Then don't say another word! especially when the person is upset or stuck on an idea or position.
- **Use fewer words.** More words from you generally do *not* make things better and usually *increase* upset.