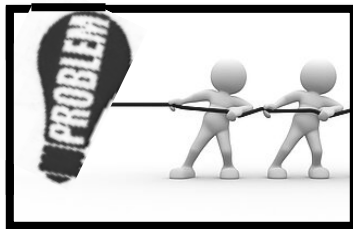
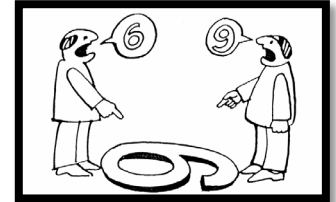


## Empathy is a Powerful Intervention

by Lisa Graziano, M.A., LMFT

One of the most fundamental interventions to help reduce anxiety, disappointment, and frustration in persons with Prader-Willi syndrome – and therefore reduce maladaptive behaviors – is empathy. **Empathy as an Intervention is a powerful and critically helpful tool for persons with PWS.**

**Empathy is the ability to see the perspective or understand the feelings of another person.** Most individuals with PWS do not possess the ability to truly see or understand the perspective of another person. 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 unwanted behaviors.



Empathy as an Intervention is not agreeing, disagreeing, or giving in; it is simply communicating that you understand the perspective, want, need, or concern of the individual with PWS. **Empathy is successful because it gets to the core of the individual's anxiety, disappointment, or frustration.** Empathy as an Intervention stops the power struggle and puts you and the individual with PWS on the same side of the same team, working together toward the same goal.

### Steps to Using Empathy as an Intervention

- 1) **Get into the mindset of the individual:** Work to understand *their* concern, problem, or upset *from their perspective*. What's *their* concern from *their* perspective? What do things look like from *their* perspective?
- 2) **Match emotional intensity of individual's concern:** Don't be afraid to match the intensity of their concern! If it's "awful" to the individual, you must convey you understand how awful it feels to *them*. Genuine empathy will not make things worse. Genuine empathy makes things better faster!
- 3) **Assess for reduction of emotional reaction:** Once the individual knows you understand their concern there is less need for them to work harder – get louder or more aggressive – to get you to understand them, and they will begin to calm.
- 4) **After reduction of emotional reaction, begin to problem solve:** Only *after* you see the individual is calming or has calmed should you begin to share *your* concern and begin to problem solve.
- 5) **Repeat from Step 1** if the individual's upset increases.

### Quick Phrases that Express Empathy and Understanding

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

### Empathy as Intervention Tips

- **Don't try to talk someone out of their upset** because they'll generally feel the need to express *more* upset to get you to understand. If your initial offer of comfort is not effective, go directly to Empathy.
- **Don't continue to use logic and reasoning.** Persons with PWS are not bound by logic or reasoning. Give up trying to think of brilliant ways to convince the individual that you are right... *all they hear is you telling them they are wrong* which will *increase* their upset.
- **Use fewer words.** If you're using more words, you're likely trying to talk the individual out of their upset or convince them you're right, both of which tend to *escalate* their upset and maladaptive behaviors. Use Empathy.
- **Don't argue. You can't win.** Instead, use "You might be right" or "That's an interesting idea."
- **Distraction after Empathy** can be effective. Disagreements can often be ended if you allow the individual to have the last word, then shift your attention and hopefully their attention to something else.

For more information about PWS or to schedule a Behavior Training, contact

Prader-Willi California Foundation

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