



ELMER

EARLY YEARS
TOOLKIT &
RESOURCES FOR



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Empathy Lab

What is the Empathy Day Festival?

The 2025 Empathy Day Festival runs from 2-12 June, culminating in Empathy Day on 12 June



Empathy Day growth



Empathy Day was launched by EmpathyLab in 2017 to draw attention to the power of reading to develop real-life empathy. Since then, it has grown massively – in 2024 over 737,000 children and young people took part in schools, libraries, community settings and homes across the UK and even other parts of the world!

Last year's participants told us they were using Empathy Day activities across more than just one day, so we listened, and this year are expanding from one day to an exciting **10-day festival**.

How to take part

Use our flexible framework of activities and events to choose how and when YOU would like to participate

Early years settings, schools, public libraries, bookshops, families, community settings – anywhere people and stories come together – can take part. You can plan activity for every day, a couple of afternoons, or just Empathy Day – it's entirely up to you. All elements are **FREE** to use or attend.

JUMP into someone else's story

Throughout the Festival, we invite you to jump into someone else's story, helping ALL young people to:

- become Empathy Activists
- learn more about empathy and develop empathy skills
- put empathy into action to make the world a better place for those around them

READ ON for a chance to win books and recognition for your setting by taking part and telling us what you think!



Seven steps to Empathy Day Festival success!



STEP 1 Save the date

The Festival runs from **2-12 June**. Empathy Day takes place on **Thursday 12 June**

STEP 2 Register for a festival planning webinar

If you haven't already, register for our webinar at 4pm on **7 May** to help you get the most out of the Festival and the Read for Empathy collection. [**Register HERE**](#).

A free webinar specifically for Library services is available via Libraries Connected on **8 April**. [**Register for the libraries webinar HERE**](#)

STEP 3 Plan your activity

Using the resources in this pack, in collaboration with colleagues and children

- Choose which of the **nine Empathy Challenge** activities to try, and who will take part
- Plan which **brilliant author & illustrator pre-recorded events** you'll watch – all will be available to watch on demand from the date they are released
- **Use our handy planner** for simple co-ordination



STEP 4 Develop your own skills and knowledge

We are offering three **FREE** brand new professional development webinars in collaboration with key partners – page 7

- Suitable for early years practitioners, teachers, librarians, parents – anyone working or living with children and young people
- Sign up to receive the link to join live



Seven steps to Empathy Day Festival success!



STEP 5 Get brilliant reading recommendations

Get inspiration for your activities using the **2025 Read for Empathy collection** to use at the heart of your activity – page 12

STEP 6 Get on the map

Add your Festival event(s) to our interactive map and share what you're doing. You can also search the map to find out what's happening near you and join other events!

[Add your events HERE](#)



STEP 7 Have your say!

Complete our **short evaluation** after the Festival – this helps us to improve and enables funding, to ensure the festival remains free to take part in.

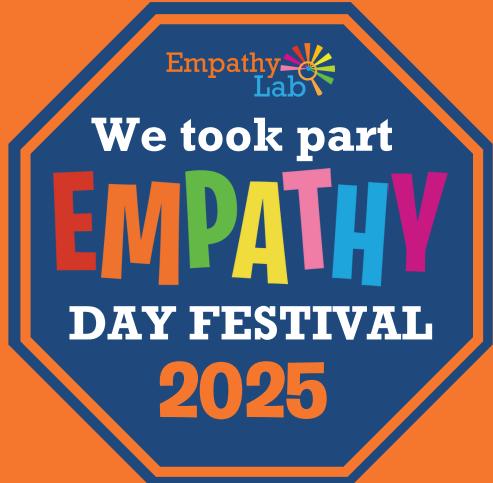


Tell us what you think and receive your Empathy Badge!

All settings completing the evaluation form will receive a digital badge to celebrate participation in the Empathy Day Festival 2025.

Display the badge on your website, social media, in newsletters - anywhere you wish!

The badge shows that your setting values empathy education and is part of EmpathyLab's movement to raise an empathy-educated generation.



A guide to involving your setting in the Empathy Day Festival



During the Empathy Day Festival, there are a number of activities suitable for the youngest children, including **exploring First Time Feelings** and an empathy-focused **Draw with Rob** session.

In the programme, we've designated **two Rhyme time days on Thursday 5 June and Tuesday 10 June**, to promote the power of rhymes, but of course you can run an empathy Rhyme time any time during the festival (see the Empathy Rhyme time outline on p. 8 that you may wish to follow).

Read on for inspiration to plan your activities.

EMPATHY CHALLENGE

This year we've also set an Empathy Challenge – **NINE** activities inviting participants to **Read, Connect and Act**. Many of these activities can be used with children in the early years.



READ

Empathy Bookshelf

Which books deserve a space on our empathy bookshelves? Join in a mass sharing of ideas. Share photos/videos

Empathy Characters

Empathising with characters is powerful. In pairs/groups, use our emotions guide to consider a character's feelings. What would you like to say to them?

Empathy Artists

Use our 500-word Empathy Shorts to spark creative work to imagine someone else's life experiences. Creative writing, poetry, artwork, drama...

CONNECT

Empathy Chat

Get to know someone better by having a good chat. Use our prompts to ease into a rich conversation

Empathy Reflections

People love feeling truly understood. Use our five point guide to practice key empathy skills - listening and reflecting back what you've heard

Empathy Emotions Map

Use leading illustrator's examples to make individual or group emotions maps, tracking changing feelings across a day. Great way to understand and share feelings

ACT

Empathy Superpower Glasses

Practice seeing through others' eyes. Decorate and don our superpower glasses, designed by a leading illustrator LIZ PICHON

Empathy Post

Use our illustrated cards to send a message of empathy to someone you know, maybe include an empathy reading recommendation just for them

Empathy Resolution

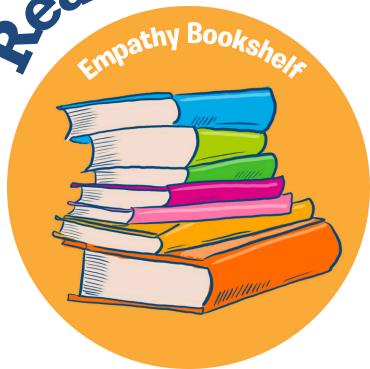
Become an empathy activist! Make a resolution to put empathy into action in your home or community. Use our special bunting!

The following page will give you some ideas to adapt The Empathy Challenge in your setting

Adapt The Empathy Challenge in your setting



Read



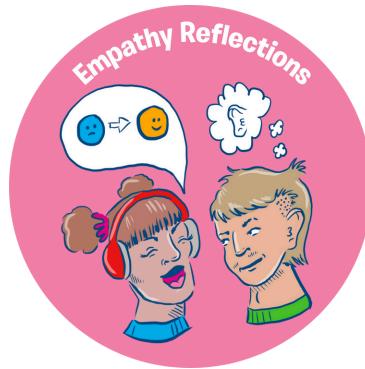
Create an **Empathy Bookshelf (or book box)** – choose board books and picture books that explore feelings and emotions and empathy for others. This could include:

- characters showing empathy, kindness or care
- characters showing different emotions, such as anger, worry or excitement
- stories that will help children understand lives different from theirs
- use the Emotions titles in the Read for Empathy collection to explore emotions at Storytime
- Run a 'jump into someone else's story' rhyme time – to connect with characters' feelings. See page 8
- When reading a book together, discuss how the characters might feel at different points in the story. Does it change through the book? Help the group recognise and name the emotions, to start building an emotional vocabulary
- If they could ask any character a question, who would they want to chat to? What would they want to find out? What do they imagine the characters would say?
- Draw a picture of your favourite character from the stories you are sharing
- Taking a key moment in a story, imagine how the characters are feeling and then show this emotion using your face and body. Experiment with how exaggerated you can make these actions.

Connect



- Practice the listening skills on the Empathy Reflections activity during as many conversations as you can – you might want to focus on one of the five points each day
- Help children practice listening skills by taking turns to talk and sitting quietly when someone else is speaking, and praise excellent listening



Adapt The Empathy Challenge in your setting



Act



- Children can make Empathy Post cards to give their family or friends
- They could draw and colour their own cards, perhaps using a favourite book as inspiration
- For the message to go in the card, consider what message of kindness or understanding they may wish to say to the person receiving the card

- Invite families and caregivers to make Empathy Resolutions and add to resolution bunting. What small step can they take to make a difference? Perhaps they will tidy away their toys without being asked or always share a story at bedtime?
- How about agreeing a resolution for the whole setting, for example 'we will all practise better sharing' or 'we will look after anyone who is upset'?

The Empathy Day Festival programme

How to watch on demand

- The 'Spark Empathy with' sessions are pre-recorded and available to watch on demand from the date listed, at any time to suit you
- We suggest focusing on the events suitable for Key Stage 1. They are **20 minutes** long and feature two top authors or illustrators. Younger children may need a break, so you can always pause the session.
- Go to EmpathyLab's YouTube channel to watch or click the link sent to your email the morning before.
- The **First Time Feelings & Elmer** sessions will also be available on our YouTube channel.

How to join LIVE

- Sign up to join any of the FREE live CPD webinar events. These are **1 hour** long and will be held online. The link will be sent out up to 48 hours before.



The Empathy Day Festival programme

[FULL DETAILS HERE](#)



Monday 2 June

- ★ **WATCH** Empathy Day Festival Welcome
with *Frank Cottrell-Boyce and Friends*
Available to watch from 30 May



- ★ **WATCH** Spark Empathy with... Ep. 1
with *Annemarie Anang & Lisa Thompson*
Available to watch from 30 May (ages 4-7)

Wednesday 4 June

- ★ **WATCH** Early Years – Share a Story with Elmer
In partnership with *Tall Stories*
Available to watch from 3 June

- 🌙 **REGISTER** EmpathyLab x World Book Day webinar
Book Chat: Building Community, Inspiring Young Readers with expert speakers & authors
[Sign up to receive the link, 6pm](#)

Thursday 5 June

- ★ **Empathy Rhyme Time** in libraries
- ★ **WATCH** Spark Empathy with... Ep. 4
with *Smriti Halls & author TBA*
Available to watch from 4 June (ages 4 - 7)
- 🌙 **REGISTER** EmpathyLab x Place2Be webinar
Reading, empathy and wellbeing with expert speakers & authors
[Sign up to receive the link, 6pm](#)

Friday 6 June

- ★ **WATCH** DRAW WITH ROB
with *Rob Biddulph*
Available to watch from 5 June (all ages)

Saturday 7 & Sunday 8 June

- ★ **Family weekend** Visit your local bookshop or library
See our map to find an event near you
Download the Empathy Day Family Toolkit



Monday 9 June

- 🌙 **REGISTER** EmpathyLab x Auticon webinar
Empathy and autism with expert speakers & authors
[Sign up to receive the link, 6pm](#)

Tuesday 10 June

- ★ **Empathy Rhyme Time** in libraries
- ★ **WATCH** First Time Feelings author film
with *Selina Brown, Phil Earle, Caryl Lewis, Nadia Shireen & Kristina Stevenson*
Available to watch from 9 June

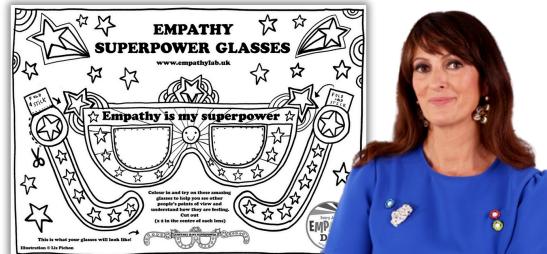
Wednesday 11 June

- ★ **WATCH** Spark Empathy with... Ep. 8
with *Rashmi Sirdeshpande & Tom Percival*
Available to watch from 10 June (ages 4-7)

Thursday 12 June

- ★ **WATCH** THE BIG SHARE
Author, *Rashmi Sirdeshpande* shares your work
Available to watch from 11 June

Get your **Empathy Superpower Glasses** ready!
By Liz Pichon, creator of The Muffles



How to run a 'Jump into someone else's story' Rhyme Time

We'd love to know what favourite Empathy Day Festival rhymes you're sharing! Let us know by tagging **@EmpathyLabUK** **#EmpathyDayFestival** on social media



This rhyme time focuses on our theme of jumping into someone else's story. It **encourages young children to imagine the feelings of the characters in the rhymes** and, by pairing rhymes, **helps children to think about what the characters might need**. Choose as many pairs of rhymes as you have time for in the session.

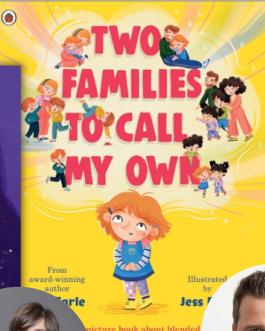
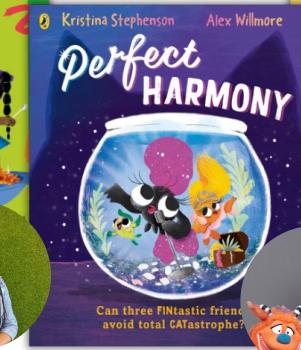
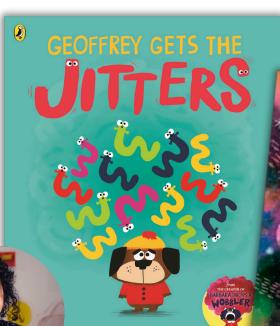
In other rhymes, children can take the perspective of the characters by **using facial expressions and body language to reflect the emotions**. To hear many of these rhymes being sung, go to [BBC Teach](#)

Welcome everyone and tell them that as it is the Empathy Day Festival we are going to jump into someone else's story through our rhymes today. We are going to share lots of rhymes that help us understand each other's feelings. Those children who are able to, can stand and do the biggest jump they can, to jump into the stories in the rhymes.

Rhyme	Connect the rhyme to the paired rhyme by talking to the children about what the characters might need	Paired rhyme
Jack and Jill Went Up the Hill	Talk about how Jack and Jill must have been sore and bruised from their tumble. What might they need to feel better – maybe a Doctor? Actions: rubbing sore arms or legs	Miss Polly Had a Doctor (could mime putting a stethoscope on)
The Grand Old Duke of York	All that marching would make people very tired – perhaps they might need a rest and a cup of tea Actions: marching and then stretching and yawning	Polly Put the Kettle On (mime making a cup of tea)
Little Miss Muffet	Poor little Miss Muffet is very scared of spiders. Maybe getting to know a friendly spider would help her feel less afraid Actions: everyone to make a scared face	Incy Wincy Spider (use your hands to make a spider in the water spout)
Dingle Dangle Scarecrow	The poor scarecrow might be quite lonely standing in the field all day. Maybe he needs company. Could the one man who went to mow be a friend? Actions: Mime being the scarecrow	One Man Went To Mow (mime mowing)
We're Marching in Our Wellingtons; I Hear Thunder; Rain, Rain Go Away Come Again Another Day	What might people need when they are out and it is cold and rainy? Maybe a bus to get where they need to be Actions: mime marching in Wellingtons or holding an umbrella	The Wheels on the Bus (all the actions in the rhyme)
Five Little Men in a Flying Saucer	Maybe they would like to land on earth one day and visit a beautiful garden Actions: mime peering out over the Earth	Mary, Mary Quite Contrary (mime watering a garden)

Let's explore First Time Feelings!

Understanding and sharing feelings is a key empathy skill, which can be developed from the earliest age. EmpathyLab are delighted to partner with Puffin Books, as part of the Festival to share a selection of picture books which help young children, their families and caregivers explore 'first time feelings' together, with accompanying new resources.



Did you know?

Picture books and shared reading can open up a portal to help understand challenges, new feelings and first-times as children experience them, helping families and children to navigate our complex world.

First Time Feelings

This gorgeous selection of picture books explores themes experienced by young children, including **belonging & inclusion**, **how to navigate sensitive home lives & unique settings**, **anxiety & nervousness**, **anger & mood management** and more.



Watch the authors

Find out what each of the authors do to demonstrate empathy in everyday life and their stories in a **brand-new video** created to watch in your setting as part of the Empathy Day Festival. See page 7.



FREE First Time Feelings activity pack

PLUS download our **brand new activity pack**, featuring a complementary activity sheet for each book, to help you explore the story's themes and characters and bring them to life in your setting or at home. Available from **1 May**.



WIN a £100 library of Puffin picture books!

Puffin are very generously offering **THREE** lucky settings the chance to win **£100 of empathy-boosting picture books EACH**. To enter, simply share photos of your setting's Empathy Day Festival activity with us **by 13 June** and we will choose our three favourites and announce them on the 16th. Email entries to empathyday@empathylab.uk with the subject **First Time Feelings**. Ts&cs apply.



What is empathy and why is it so important?



EMPATHY

is our ability to experience and understand someone else's feelings

Children and young peoples' wellbeing is in decline, impacted by multiple factors. The latest Children's Society report shows that our 15-year-olds have the lowest life satisfaction in Europe, and charity Mind has found that 1 in 5 school-age children has a mental health difficulty.

Developing empathy and being able to use that understanding to act in the interests of others is one of the very best of our human qualities, and nurturing it in our children and young people is a powerful way to invest in a better future.

JUMP into someone else's story

Our theme this year is **JUMP INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY**. When children jump into a book, they identify with the characters and learn to see things from another person's point of view, starting to develop their empathy skills.

- Developing empathy strategies are a hugely important part of the solution to combatting hatred and division, as they are fundamental to developing the positive relationships children need to thrive.
- Our approach to empathy education is based on scientific research which shows that **empathy is learnable**. Empathy is a skill, not a trait.
- Having **empathy-rich books** woven into children and young people's reading for pleasure activity is a very practical, and hopeful thing we can all do.



Why is empathy important in the early years?



How it develops

Young children's empathy starts off as 'feelings-based' behaviour, where the child has an urge to help based on a feeling, but empathy truly starts to develop as children start to realise that what they think and feel is not the same as everyone else.

The Festival shines a light on emotional skills and understanding for the youngest children and provides fun activities to allow them to practise early empathy skills, in particular to understand and express their own feelings and recognise those of other people.

'The importance of cultivating social and emotional skills from early childhood throughout life has never been clearer. These skills are essential not only for individual wellbeing but also for the flourishing of our communities and societies as a whole.'

Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, 'The Shaping Us Framework' 2025

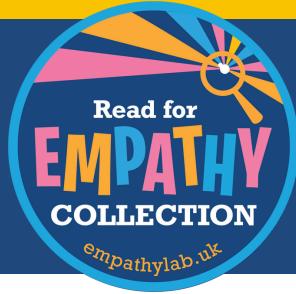
Early Years Foundation Stage

The Empathy Day Festival activities support **five areas of learning and development in the Early Years Foundation Stage**

- **Communication and language development:** Share books and talk about characters and feelings. Use emotions-focused rhymes, model using emotion language.
- **Personal, social and emotional development:** Share rhymes face-to-face. Provide activities that help children see from another's perspective.
- **Literacy:** Introduce children to new stories and rhymes as part of Empathy Day activities.
- **Understanding of the world:** Share stories to introduce children to new and unfamiliar characters and their lives. Talk about similarities and differences.
- **Expressive arts and design:** Provide imaginative activities such as art and role play to explore characters' feelings.



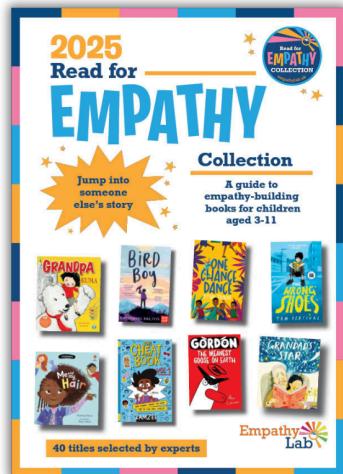
Looking for great empathy-boosting books?



JUMP

into someone else's story

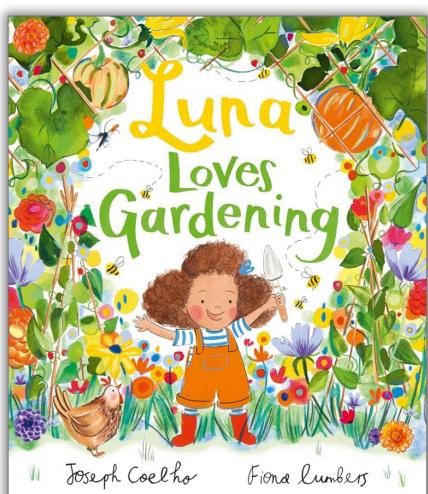
Discover the 2025 Read for Empathy collection



The Read for Empathy collection is 70 books selected by a panel of expert judges. Titles cover a wide range of genres for ages 3-16+. Rich and diverse, the collection reflects different ways of seeing the world – critical for empathy understanding and ideal to use alongside your empathy work.

[Download your FREE Guide](#)

What is an empathy-boosting book?



- High quality, authentic writing
- Carefully crafted characters
- Challenges tribal thinking
- Tackles contemporary empathy issues



TIP

Use the titles from this year's – or previous collections – as inspiration for your Empathy Day Festival activities:

- In displays
- For families to share
- Reading aloud
- Book of the week

How to make the most of the Empathy Day Festival in your setting



Preparation

- Make sure the whole setting knows about the Empathy Day Festival – encourage all children, staff and families to take part
- Use our short powerpoint (coming soon) to introduce the concept of empathy, and with staff to show how reading builds empathy . Build anticipation for the festival!
- Plan a whole setting celebration
- Make sure parents and carers know about Empathy Day. From **1 May**, encourage them to download the **Family Toolkit** from www.empathylab.uk and make the most of half-term just before the Festival for empathy activity

We'd love to see YOUR Empathy Day Festival!



Share what you do, make, create and discuss with us at EmpathyLab!
Share on social media
@EmpathyLabUK
#EmpathyDayFestival

Examples from across the festival will be shared on Empathy Day, during THE BIG SHARE with Rashmi Sirdeshpande

We will also choose our favourites and send books to the young people featured, to say thank you for participating!

During the Festival

- Take a giant JUMP photo with children holding their favourite empathy-boosting books
- Have an Empathy story time each afternoon using books from the Read for Empathy collection
- Organise a weekly Empathy Rhyme Time to share your favourite rhymes

Using the Empathy Challenge activities on page 4. Why not:

- challenge children to take part in as many as they can
- choose activities to do as a group
- focus on a different activity each day of the Festival
- send activities home for children to do with the adults who care for them

Thanks to our
Festival patron



Peters



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Thanks to
Andersen Press
for sponsoring
this toolkit

Your Empathy Day Festival Checklist

Use this checklist to keep your
Empathy Festival plans on track



1. **ADD** key dates to the nursery/pre-school calendar
2. **TALK** to all staff about Empathy Day, **COLLABORATE** on plans and ideas
3. **PHOTOCOPY/PRINT** resources and decide which you want to use
4. **PLAN** your Empathy Rhyme Time for one of the Rhyme time days and **ADD** your event(s) to the interactive Empathy Day Festival map
5. **USE** our handy planner to plan which online events/storytelling sessions you'll watch
6. **ENTER** our exclusive competition to win £100 of Puffin picture books
7. **SIGN UP** for any Festival CPD webinars
8. **SHARE** stories from the 2025 Read for Empathy collection
9. **COMPLETE** the Empathy Day Festival evaluation survey
10. **DISPLAY** your Empathy Badge with pride!

What next?

There are lots more opportunities to ensure **EVERY** day is Empathy Day in your setting.



Professional development training

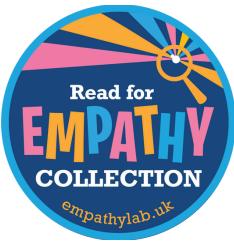
We offer **year-round online training** for anyone living or working with children.

Webinars cover different aspects of empathy education, with practical ways to apply learning in your setting.

Find out more [HERE](#)

Raising Generation Empathy? The power of reading in social and emotional development

Be part of our major conference on **27 November**, exploring the latest research on reading for empathy, as we create a manifesto for change to take empathy education mainstream. Watch out for further details at www.empathylab.uk



How to order the collection

- Find your local independent bookshop [HERE](#)
- Order online via EmpathyLab's Bookshop.org page [HERE](#)
- Order via your usual supplier
- Borrow the books from your local library

Support us

EmpathyLab is a small not-for-profit social enterprise with no regular funding.

If you believe raising an empathy educated generation matters, please consider donating [HERE](#)

Every donation, however small, helps us reach more children and young people.

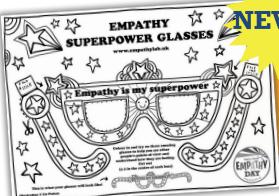
Join us in our mission to raise an empathy-educated generation, inspired to build a better world for everyone. Help us reach and benefit 1 MILLION children & young people a year by 2026.

For all the latest news and updates, [join our newsletter](#)



FREE RESOURCES TO DOWNLOAD

[CLICK HERE TO GET YOUR RESOURCES](#)



Empathy Superpower glasses by **LIZ PICHON**



Empathy Post cards



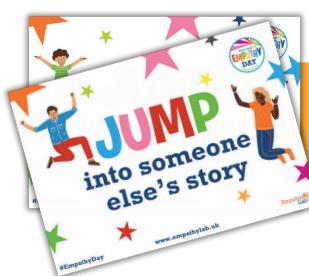
Empathy Reflections listening guide



Empathy Day Festival Planner



Read for Empathy ticklist

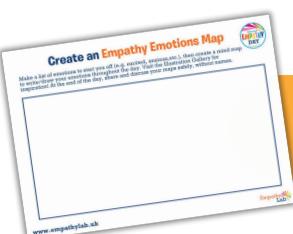


Posters

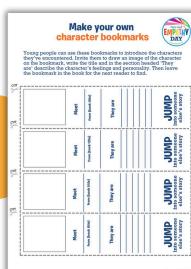
NEW



Empathy Artist poster



Empathy Emotions Map template

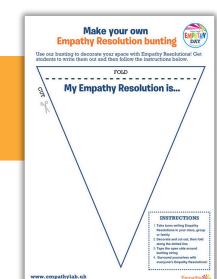


Character bookmarks



Empathy reading tips

NEW



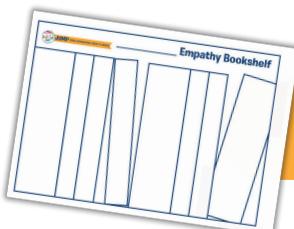
Empathy Resolution posters and bunting

NEW

Empathy Characters emotions guide



Empathy Bookshelf template and header



Empathy Chat discussion prompts

NEW

