

Kirk Hallam Community Academy

Case study

Kirk Hallam Community Academy is a medium-sized 11–18 academy, situated in the Erewash area of Derbyshire. They joined EmpathyLab’s Schools Programme in June 2025.

In the first year of implementation, Kirk Hallam focused their reading for empathy work in three key areas: KS3 library lessons, the Personal Development curriculum and their Alternative Provision

Introducing empathy-focused texts alongside empathy book talk and other simple interventions such as creative and immersive activities, emotion wheels story trackers and empathy journals, has had the following impact:

KS3 Library Lessons

- Key empathy skills increasingly evident while reading
- Improved confidence when discussing emotions
- Improved oracy through precise vocabulary choices
- Greater engagement with high-quality texts

- Increased opportunities to recognise and name emotions
- More thoughtful and honest discussions
- Students feeling less embarrassed to discuss sensitive topics
- Better understanding of each other and others

Personal Development

Alternative Provision

- Students demonstrate improved perspective-taking skills
- Stronger student–staff relationships; improved peer interactions
- Greater sense of belonging and engagement in learning
- Students better able to recognise complex emotions and regulate behaviour
- Increased participation in respectful dialogue and restorative conversations

“Students who used to shrug when asked about feelings are now actually able to articulate them. And that’s changed how they interact with each other.”

“Our students have started to slow down. They’re noticing things in characters they would’ve skimmed past before. They’re naming emotions they didn’t have words for.”

KS3 Literacy Lead

Kirk Hallam Community Academy

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Prioritising empathy with stories in Alternative Provision

“Reading for Empathy is helping our most vulnerable students move from survival mode to reflection, giving them language, confidence and new choices. The programme has given them the words to understand their emotions, reflect on behaviour and perhaps most importantly, rebuild and maintain relationships.”

Alternative Education Leader

Weekly Reading for Empathy sessions give them a safe structure to explore emotions without feeling exposed. The journals are vital! Some students will write things they're not ready to say out loud.

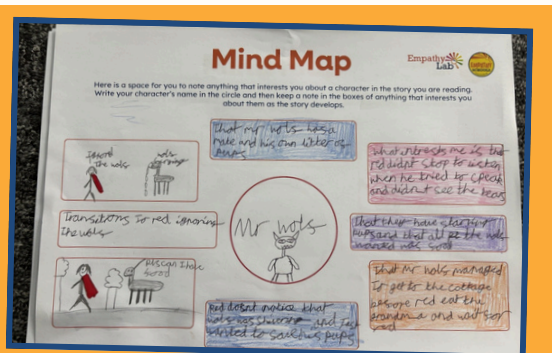
If a student is dysregulated, often we start with a story. The character becomes a safe third point in the room. We explore what the character is feeling, what might have triggered them, what their body might be doing, what choices they made next. That distance is powerful. It's much safer to talk about a character than yourself.

But gradually, the bridge forms and then they're reflecting on their own responses without feeling judged.

We created a bank of empathy short stories that deal with lived experiences of our particular demographic and our students. We spend time understanding their story. We actively model empathy for their lived experiences not excusing behaviour, just giving it context. Students feel understood before they feel corrected.

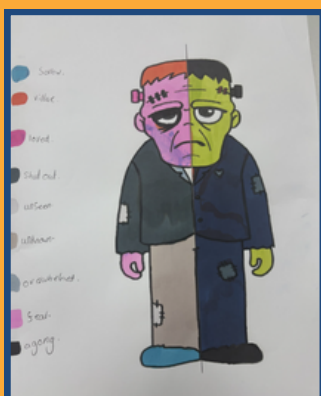


Through Art, students can express their own emotions, while also learning to appreciate and share the feelings of others.



SEND students are better able to explore their own emotions through empathy for the characters.

Students are starting to understand classic literature through an emotional connection to the characters.



And the impact is visible. Fewer explosive reactions. Faster recovery when they do happen. Language like, "I felt ignored," instead of instant confrontation. More relationship repair.