

# An Investigation of Empathic Skills of Children and Parents

By

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## Abstract

*This study was conducted to examine children's empathic tendencies with respect to their gender and to investigate the relationship between empathic tendencies of children and empathic skills of parents. The study has been conducted on a sample of 261 people, composed of 87 children from the grades ranging between third and fifth, including 47 female and 40 male children who attend Pamukkale Educational Foundation PEV Primary School in the Denizli province of Turkey and their mothers (87) and fathers (87). In order to determine children's empathic tendency, "KA-Sİ Scale of Emphatic Tendency for Children and Adolescents – Children Form" developed by Kaya & Siyez (2010) has been applied. In order to evaluate empathic ability of the parents, "Empathic Ability Scale-B Form" developed by Dökmen (1988, 1990) has been applied. The results showed that a significant difference in favor of girls existed in the "Emotional Sensitivity" and "Cognitive Sensitivity" dimensions as well as the "Total Empathic Tendency Score" obtained from the KA-Sİ Emphatic Tendency Scale for Children and Adolescents – Children's Form. ( $p < 0.05$ ). The data were analyzed by using "T-Test" and "Pearson Correlation Test". The research results have revealed that the gender of the child has an influence on the empathic tendencies of children, but not on the empathic skills of both parents. It has also been determined that although there is not a correlation between the empathic tendency scores of children and the empathic skill scores of parents, there is a positive correlation between the empathic skill scores of mothers and those of fathers.*

**Keywords:** Empathic skills, empathy, children.

## 1. Introduction

As social beings, humans take place in a network of various relationships which emerge as a requirement of social life. Success in such relationships depends on a person's conception and acceptance of himself and others. Empathy, which can be defined as an individual's potential to understand others in human relationships, is considered as an important trait that determines the quality of a relationship (Hortaçsu, 2003; Yılmaz Yüksel, 2003; Kaya & Siyez, 2010; Köksal Akyol, et. al., 2011a; Sali, 2012). Empathic conception brings people closer and facilitates communication in almost all areas of daily life. Empathic ability inhibits communication conflicts and ensures establishment of more positive relationships. Thus, not only better relationships are established between people but also an individual who employs empathic skills in interpersonal relationships can even contribute to the spread of empathic communication, being a role model for others (Kalliopuska, 1992; Woolfolk, 1993; Dökmen, 1994; Köksal, 2000a; Yüksel, 2004). The observation of empathic attitudes in other people's lives and taking such behavior as role-model help acquisition of social sensitivity and social skills as positive traits, especially at young ages. Furthermore, it was found that social functionality, emotional sensitivity and emotional regulation are all correlated with advanced level of empathic reaction (Eisenberg, et al., 1994; 25 Eisenberg, et al., 1996; Özbay & Şahin, 2000).

Empathy, which has been an important concept in our lives, has different definitions (Hoffman, 1987; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Pecukonis, 1990); Palmeri-Sams & Truscott, 2004; Smith, 2006). Empathy is generally defined as understanding and sharing the emotional situation of the other person (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). Empathy is considered as understanding the emotions and thoughts of other people or putting ourselves in others' places (Tamborini, et al., 1990), the ability to perceive the world from others

perspectives (Barak, 1990), and understanding other people's emotional situation or replying to their conditions (Bengtsson & Johnson, 1992). Hoffman defines empathy as "an appropriate emotional reaction shown to other's situation rather than to the situation that the individual is in". In such an empathic reaction, the emotional situation of both parties need not be the same. An emotional reaction that is generally compliant with the situation that the other person is in can be qualified as an empathic reaction (Davis, 1994). Meador and colleagues defined empathy as focusing on the phenomenological world of other people (as cited in: Kapıkıran, 2010). Its multi-dimensional nature accounts for so many definitions of empathy (Lawrence, et al., 2004). It is accepted that empathy is composed of cognitive and emotional elements, that these elements interact with each other and that cognitive or emotional reaction is given depending on the situation (Chlopan, et al., 1985; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Brems, 1989). The cognitive dimension of empathy, which means being able to evaluate the perspective of the other person, is influential on the social functionality of individuals (Smith, 2006). The emotional dimension of empathy means to be able to feel the other's emotion and to show the most appropriate reaction for other person's emotional situation (De Wied, et al., 2005; De Kemp, et al., 2007). Today, one of the most accepted definitions of empathy has been made by Rogers: "empathy is the process of one's putting him in other's place and seeing things from his perspective, understanding and feeling his emotions and thoughts correctly and communicating this situation to him" (Dökmen, 1988).

At different development stages of human life, empathic tendency can be sensed especially among school children. At school age, the relations of children change; friends and teachers also become important in addition to the family, and positive and negative relations with these people can easily affect the child. For this reason, it is quite important that children at this age have empathic tendency and use this ability to solve their problems. A child who has highly developed empathic skills can put himself in other's place and approach events differently, analyzing communication problems more healthily. According to Yavuzer (2004), if a child can see events from others' perspectives, he can also regulate his own behavior based on his understanding of another person's attitudes, emotions and motivations, becoming more harmonized with his environment. İnanç and colleagues (2005) stated that it is more probable for children who have low level of empathic skills to have difficulties in understanding their friends, teachers and families. This can result in the exclusion of the child from his environment. Therefore, positive development of empathic tendencies of children should be supported and the factors that can affect empathic tendencies should be determined (Yavuzer, 2004; İnanç, et al., 2005).

Family is one of these important factors. The empathic tendencies of children develop in the way as it is seen in the family. Research indicates that various factors in the family affect empathic tendencies of children. In addition, such studies also examine the relationship between empathic skills of mothers and self respect levels of children (Körükçü, 2004), empathic skill level of mothers and their child-rearing attitudes (Uçmaz Halıcıoğlu, 2004), empathic skills of parents and perspective-taking skills of children (Oğuz & Köksal Akyol, 2008), parent attitudes and their acceptance-refusal levels and empathic skills of their children (Önder & Gülay, 2007; Çetin, 2008). These studies have presented the influence of parents' empathic skills on children, as well as the effect of their child-rearing attitudes on children's empathic skills. However, it is notable that there are not any studies examining the effects of parents' empathic skills on children's empathic skills. Furthermore, it is accepted that the children of empathic parents take their parents as an example and use empathic skills in their relations. Based on this belief, it has been aimed to examine empathic tendencies of children and empathic skills of parents, to determine whether the gender of children affects their empathic tendencies and empathic skills of parents, and to make recommendations according to the findings.

## **2. Method**

### ***Research Model***

This research is a descriptive study aiming to examine empathic tendencies of children and empathic skills of parents, and to determine whether the gender of children affects their empathic tendencies and empathic skills of parents.

### ***Study Group***

The study group of the research involved 261 participants: 47 female and 40 male pupils (a total of 87 pupils) from the Pamukkale Education Trust Private (PEV) Elementary School – in Denizli province of Turkey – and their mothers (87) and fathers (87). Fifty point six percent, 39.1% and 10.3% of the children were attending third, fourth and fifth grades, respectively. The majority of the mothers who participated in the study (44.8%) were in the 35-40 age group and the majority of the fathers (41.4%) were in the 40-45 age group.

### ***Data Collecting Instruments***

As data collecting instruments of the research, a Demographic Information Form, KA-Sİ Scale of Empathic Tendency for Children and Adolescents – Children Form, and Empathic Ability Scale-B Form (EAS-Form B) developed by Dökmen (1988, 1990) were used.

*2.3.1. Demographic Information Form:* This form was developed by the researchers to collect information about children and their parents regarding the gender, age, grade level of children, and the age of parents.

*KA-Sİ Emphatic Tendency Scale for Children and Adolescents – Children's Form:* The scale was developed by Kaya & Siyez (2010) in order to assess the emphatic tendencies of children attending grades 3 through 5. It contains two factors: cognitive empathy (6 items) and emotional empathy (7 items). The four-point graded response style is as follows: “(1) Not true for me at all, (2) Somewhat true for me, (3) Very true for me, and (4) Completely true for me”. As the scale contains no negative statements, the scoring of responses is parallel to the response style. The sum of the points obtained from the 7 items measuring emotional empathy yield the participant's emotional empathy subdimension score; those obtained from the 6 items measuring cognitive empathy yield the participant's cognitive empathy subdimension score empathy, and the sum of these two yields the total emphatic tendency score. The minimum score to be obtained from the emotional empathy subdimension is  $7 \times 1 = 7$  and the maximum score  $7 \times 4 = 28$ , minimum cognitive empathy score is  $6 \times 1 = 6$  and the maximum score  $6 \times 4 = 24$ , minimum total emphatic tendency score is  $13 \times 1 = 13$  and the maximum total emphatic tendency score  $13 \times 4 = 52$ . As the scores increase, so does emphatic tendency and vice versa (Kaya & Siyez, 2010).

*Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B (ESS-Form B) Dökmen (1988):* This scale was used to determine the empathetic skill of parents. The Empathetic Skills Scale Form B is a measure developed based on the gradual empathy classification, and it stresses on the cognitive component of empathy. The scale included six separate psychological problems regarding daily life. There were twelve reactions for each problem. The subjects were asked to select four of these twelve reactions, each of which was assigned scores ranging from one to ten. The sum of these scores was the total score received. One of the twelve reactions submitted under each problem was meaningless and the form of the subject who selected this choice was invalidated.

The first of the six psychological problem situations in the Empathetic Skills Scale Form B was about housewives. The participants were asked to read this situation, and mark four of the reactions that they would give a housewife in this situation. The housewife expressed her situation as follows: “Cooking, washing, cleaning, sewing, shopping, children... I run around the house on my own all day long; still, I cannot catch up with the daily chores. I don't even have five minutes to spare for myself. I feel imprisoned between the kitchen and the bathroom.” The reactions that the participants could mark were: 1. Have you ever thought of hiring someone to help you with the housework? 2. How long in a day does it take you to do all this? 3. Doesn't your husband help you at all? 4. As far as I understand, you find housework very hard. 5. You are not the only one who does housework in the world; it is not right to make it an issue like this. 6. You are right, this much work really distresses anyone. 7. In my opinion, your problem is not that you cannot manage all the work but there is too much work to do. 8. If I were you, I would feel distressed, too. 9. I think you feel desperate and lonely with this much work. 10. I agree with you; actually, housework is easy to do. 11. My mother (or another close person to you) is also

distressed for doing housework continuously. 12. I think having to do this much housework makes you angry. The other five psychologically problematic situations were about a young person, a friend, a boy friend, a girl friend and a student. The higher the total score, the better the empathetic skills. Dökmen administered the Empathetic Skills Scale Form B to sixty freshman students of Ankara University, Faculty of Education and twenty-four psychologists working in different institutions, with the aim of testing its reliability and validity. For reliability, the Empathetic Skills Scale Form B was administered to sixty subjects with an interval of two weeks ( $r = 0.83, p < .001$ ). In the validity study, there was a significant difference in empathy between the students and psychologists in favour of the latter ( $t = 8.15, P < .001$ ). In another validity study, a relationship was found between the Empathetic Skills Scale Form B and the Role Playing Test ( $r = 0.78, p < .001$ ); (Dökmen 1990). As the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B was developed for young people and adults, it was used to determine the empathetic skill of the parents only.

### ***Analysis of Data***

The data obtained from children and parents were scored and analyzed using the SPSS program. “T-Test” was applied to determine whether the gender of children had any effect on their empathic tendencies and on the empathic skills of parents. “Pearson Correlation Test” was applied to determine the relationship between empathic tendencies of children and empathic skills of their parents (Büyüköztürk, 2002).

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study, whose goal is to examine empathic tendencies of children and empathic skills of parents, and to determine whether the gender of children affects their empathic tendencies and empathic skills of parents, have been presented in tables and discussed.

Table 1 shows that while the gender of children affects their emotional ( $t_{(85)}=3.895, p<.001$ ), cognitive ( $t_{(85)}=3.286, p<.001$ ) and total ( $t_{(85)}=4.038, p<.001$ ) empathic tendencies, it does not lead to a meaningful difference in the empathic skills of mothers ( $t_{(85)}=-.015, p>.05$ ) and fathers ( $t_{(85)}=-.984, p>.05$ ). The results showed that a significant difference existed between girls’ and boys’ emotional sensitivity, cognitive sensitivity sub-dimensions and their total empathy tendency scores. The mean scores of girls were significantly higher than those of boys. The studies on empathic skills indicate that there are varying results about the effect of gender on empathy. While some research has found that gender has an impact on empathic skills and that girls are more empathic compared to boys, there are also studies indicating that gender has no impact on empathic skills. Studies conducted by Bryant (1982), Eisenberg & Lennon (1983), Hietolahti-Ansten & Kalliopuska (1990), Kalliopuska (1991), Köksal (2000b), Alver (1998), Öner (2001), Akın (2002), (Köksal, 1997), Ulutaş (2005), Köksal Akyol & Oğuz (2007) and Köksal Akyol, et al. (2011b) presented that gender has no impact on children’s perspective-taking skills and empathic skills. On the other hand, Köksal Akyol, et al. (2011a) examined the empathic tendencies of children and found that their gender had an impact on empathic tendency, which is similar to the findings of this study. Previous research results also showed that empathy skills differed with respect to gender, and this difference was caused by factors such as social roles, structural characteristics and way of upbringing (Feschbach & Roe 1968; Bryant, 1982; Eisenberg, 1982, Kalliopuska, 1983; Davis, 1994; Köksal Akyol, 2005). Differences between parents’ child-rearing attitudes play a major role in the development of children’s empathic skills. Girls are encouraged by their social environment to be more compliant and understanding than boys. Actually, Mc Devit, et al., (1991) found that mothers promoted the empathic tendencies of especially their daughters, that they shared matters more emotionally with them and that they were keener on their daughters behaving empathically.

Table 2 shows that there is no correlation between the emotional ( $r=-.005, p>0.05$ ), cognitive ( $r=.019, p>0.05$ ) and total ( $r=.006, p>0.05$ ) empathic tendency scores of children and the empathic skill scores of mothers. Furthermore, no correlation has been found between the emotional ( $r=-.053, p>0.05$ ), cognitive ( $r=-.032, p>0.05$ ) and total ( $r=-.048, p>0.05$ ) empathic tendency scores of children and the empathic skill

scores of fathers.

Some points of view advocate that the empathic skills of parents have an impact on the development of children's empathic skills. The children of highly empathic mothers can react more emotionally than those who have mothers with low empathic levels. Moreover, such children tend to help people in difficult situations (Barnett, 1990; Kalliopuska & Titinen, 1991; Feshbach, 1990). According to Strayer and Roberts (2004), warm parental relations and parents' expressing their feelings lead to higher empathic tendency in the child. According to Köksal (2000b), there are individual differences between children's reactions toward other people's emotional situations, and these reactions are affected by their parents, who set a role-model for the child, and other individuals in their immediate vicinity. Lipsitt (1993) examined the relationship between the empathic skills and communication style of the mother and the empathic skill of the child, finding that the empathic skills of the mother did not have an impact on estimating the empathic skill of the child but the communication style of the mother did have a role on this estimation. Yet, some studies indicate that there is no relationship between the empathic or perspective-taking skills of the child and the empathic skills of parents. In their study that they conducted to examine the relationship between the empathic skills of parents and perspective-taking skills of children, Oğuz & Köksal Akyol (2008) determined that the empathic skills of parents did not have an impact on perspective-taking skills of children. Kalliopuska (1984) examined the empathic skills of children and parents and found that there is no variation in the results. Garner, et al. (1997) put forth in their study that there is not a correlation between the empathic skill of the mother and emotional perspective-taking of children.

As can also be seen in Table 3, there is a positive correlation between the empathic skill scores of mothers and fathers ( $r=-.048, p<0.05$ ). Empathic understanding brings people closer in almost all areas of daily life and facilitates communication. When empathy is established, people feel that they are understood and that they are important. Being understood and cared by others relaxes people and helps them feel better (Dökmen, 1994). In marriage, too, an empathic relationship between couples is influential in parties' understanding each other, feel better and have a longer-lasting relationship. Moreover, in terms of some characteristics, couples take each other as their role-models as they share their lives. For this reason, it can be asserted that it is meaningful to obtain in this study the result that the empathic skills of parents are compliant with each other's. In a study, Hasdemir (2007) also determined that there was not a variation between the empathic skills of mothers and fathers and that their empathic skill scores were close.

**Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and T-Test Results of Children's Empathic Tendencies and Parents' Empathic Skills by the Gender of the Child**

GROUP	GENDER	N	$\bar{X}$	S	sd	t	P
<b>CHILD Emotional</b>	Female	47	24.45	3.48	85	3.895	<b>.000</b>
	Male	40	21.42	3.74			
<b>CHILD Cognitive</b>	Female	47	21.43	2.86	85	3.286	<b>.001</b>
	Male	40	19.35	3.01			
<b>CHILD Total</b>	Female	47	45.87	5.92	85	4.038	<b>.000</b>
	Male	40	40.78	5.79			
<b>MOTHER</b>	Female	47	139.32	24.31	85	-.015	.998
	Male	40	139.40	25.04			
<b>FATHER</b>	Female	47	129.21	23.77	85	-.984	.328
	Male	40	134.15	22.75			

**Table 2. Pearson Correlation Test Results of Children's Empathic Tendency Scores and Parents' Empathic Skill Scores**

CHILD		MOTHER Empathic Skill Scale	FATHER Empathic Skill Scale
Emotional Empathic Tendency Sub-scale	r	-.005	-.053
	p	.964	.623
	N	87	87
Cognitive Empathic Tendency Sub-scale	r	.019	-.032
	p	.862	.769
	N	87	87
Empathic Tendency Total Scale	r	.006	-.048
	p	.955	.685
	N	87	87

**Table 3. Pearson Correlation Test Results of Parents' Empathic Skill Scores**

MOTHER		FATHER
	R	.231
	P	<b>.031</b>
	N	87

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

To be able to survive as a social being, communication and empathy are very important in the lives of people. By using the empathy establishing skills, communication conflicts are prevented and more healthy relations are established both in the family and with the environment. This study focused on empathy, which is important in our lives, and examined the empathic skills of children and parents to determine whether the gender of children had an impact on the empathic skills of parents. The study has concluded that the gender of children is influential on the empathic skills of children but not on the empathic skills of mothers or fathers. Furthermore, although it has been determined that there is a correlation between the empathic skill scores of children and those of parents, there is a positive correlation between the empathic skill scores of mothers and empathic skill scores of fathers. In light of the findings of the research, the following recommendations can be made:

- The research suggests that the empathic tendency of girls is higher than that of boys. This can be due to the effect of expectations of parents from their children or their being a role-model for them. For healthy social relations, all individuals should be in empathic relationships regardless of gender discrimination.
- In this regard, it can be suggested that the empathic skill development of boys should be supported. For this purpose, education programs to raise awareness for the effects of developed empathic communication in parents and developed communication skills in children can be arranged.
- In this study, the sampling consisted of pupils attending third, fourth and fifth grades of elementary schools and their parents. A similar study can be conducted among different age groups and their parents.

- A longitudinal study can be carried out to monitor the development of children's empathic skills and to find out the effects of parental empathic skills on those of children.
- Different variables that could be influential on the development of children's empathic skills can be studied.

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