

EEP EP145 - Dr. Michele Borba - Edited Audio

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SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Dr. Michele Borba

Dr. Michele Borba 00:01

problem that we don't know. I think that why I wrote unselfie is that many parents didn't realize that the majority of our children are hardwired to care. But unless we nurture that it lies dormant, also finding as a spillover effect that empathy is actually decreasing in American youth, and narwhal narcissism is going up. So in all fairness, it means that we just need to be a little bit more intentional about it. And it does not mean that we need, oh, gosh, new tutors fancy your programs. It's just looking at simple, proven evidence based ways to weave this into our everyday living, whether it's as parents, whether it's as a business people, whether it's as spouses, whether it's partners, whether it's grandparents. The other thing I think is critical is make sure it's evidence based. I'm seeing a lot of things out there that looked cute, but they're touchy feely, and they don't have the impact on really stretching our children's empathy or nor ours.

Maria Ross 01:02

Welcome to the empathy edge podcast, the show that proves why cashflow, creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. I'm your host Maria Ross. I'm a speaker, author, mom, facilitator and empathy advocate. And here you'll meet trailblazing leaders and executives, authors and experts who embrace empathy to achieve radical success. We discuss all facets of empathy from trends and research to the future of work to how to heal societal divisions and collaborate more effectively. Our goal is to redefine success and prove that empathy isn't just good for society, it's great for business. Our children more or less empathetic than they used to be. We adults parents are not need to care about the answer since younger generations are our future corporate, government and civic leaders. How important is empathy to their success? And how can empathy be increased and stretched? A few months ago, I heard this force of a woman named Dr. Michele Borba on my friend Adam Dorsey's podcast Supersite and I immediately texted him for an introduction. The shell is an educational psychologist and former teacher recognized for offering research driven advice culled from a career of working with over 1 million parents, educators and children, a frequent Today's Show contributor. She's the recipient of the National Educator Award, and character.org 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award. Michelle is the author of 25 books, including unselfie, The Big Book of parenting solutions, and thrivers the surprising reasons why some kids struggle and others shine. Today we talk about the value of empathy and why it's crucial we teach character to our children. She shares research that empathy has

been on the decline for children since 2000, and what effect the pandemic has on their empathy and resilience. But don't lose hope. We also talk about the amazing ways young people are building empathy and changing the world. Michelle shares the seven most crucial character strengths that boost resilience, peak performance and well being and how they work together for both children and US adults. Finally, she shares practical evidence based simple ways to cultivate children's empathy and resilience. And yes, these can work for you and your team to take a listen. Dr. Michelle, welcome to the empathy edge Podcast. I'm so glad we finally made this interview happen.

Dr. Michele Borba 03:38

Oh, me too. I've been looking forward to this for so long. So thank you. So I want to get

Maria Ross 03:44

right to it. Your work is fascinating. Your books are fascinating working on all aspects of helping children thrive and helping them be emotionally intelligent. So let's talk very specifically about the value of empathy. And why character is crucial to teach our children because I think we think about the ABCs we think about math and the standardized tests, and all the things and I feel like there is a movement to teach children more emotional and social and character building learning. But what's your perspective?

Dr. Michele Borba 04:15

Oh, gosh, let me count the ways and how much time do you have? I think it is probably the most crucial trade empathy right now than any other trait we have, particularly in an AI world, which is accelerated fast paced, driven, but now we have something called research to prove it. Harvard Business Review says empathy is the top leading employability factor. We're looking at Fortune 500 companies over and over saying this is absolutely essential. I just got back from Saudi Arabia about four days ago. They were bringing me in with professors from all over the world, realizing that they could not invent something unless they made sure that their students could step into the shoes of the client or the customer. And then let's go one step more, how about our mental health and well being seems to be at a little bit of a plummeting level these days. But we do know if we've learned anything from the pandemic and COVID that relationships and belonging are essential. And fact, it's probably the number one trait that's going to help us raise mentally happy, aware parents, grownups business people, as well as children. We just have to add it intentionally to our parenting and business plans. What I

Maria Ross 05:31

love this, and I even I even wrote in the book that I hope someday we get to a world where books like the empathy edge are not necessary, because it's such a part of our DNA and who we are sort of like breathing, right? So I love the work that you're doing. And I love that you're starting with children, because they are going to be our future leaders, they are going to be our future adults, citizens, what have you. And so helping them at, you know, for us adults,

Dr. Michele Borba 05:55

all hope is not lost, as evidenced by my work, we can strengthen that muscle. But how much better is it if we're able to create and nurture children for whom that muscle is really strong? And what I love about your work is it's identifying and, and it was thrilled to find all the research and the data around this about why it's important, but just building that muscle. So as I spoke to one person that I interviewed for

my book, it's just part of these kids identities to be empathetic. Yeah, as long as we stretch it and strengthen it, yes, the problem that we don't know, I think that why I wrote on selfie is that many parents didn't realize that the majority of our children are hardwired to care. But unless we nurture that it lies dormant, also finding as a spillover effect, that empathy is actually decreasing in American youth, and narwhal narcissism is going up. So in all fairness, it means that we just need to be a little bit more intentional about it. And it does not mean that we need, oh, gosh, new tutors, fancier programs. It's just looking at simple, proven evidence based ways to weave this into our everyday living, whether it's as parents, whether it's as a business people, whether it's spouses, whether it's partners, whether it's grandparents. The other thing I think it's critical is make sure it's evidence based, I'm seeing a lot of things out there that look cute, but they're touchy feely, and they don't have the impact on really stretching our children's empathy or nor ours.

Maria Ross 07:29

Yeah, and I love that. And we're gonna, we're going to talk about those simple ways as well, in this in this interview, I often talk about it as as going to the gym and getting in shape. Once you have the six pack abs, you can't stop going to the gym, you can't stop working out, you can't stop taking care of your body. And it's the same thing with empathy, that muscle can atrophy if it's not nurtured and stretched, like you said. So I want to talk about something you just said, because I, I've seen conflicting research on both sides. And I would love your perspective, because some research says, you know, Gen Z is the most empathetic generation that we've had. And they're they're much more appreciative of diversity and different points of view and all that. And then there are other studies that show that empathy is waning in younger generations. So can you talk a little bit about that research that talks about empathy being on the decline?

Dr. Michele Borba 08:19

Yes. And it doesn't mean that generation Z is not a wonderful caring generation. It just means the culture we're raising them in, is taking down their empathy and their concern themselves. The work came from Sarah Conrad and Jean twing. And I love them both. Actually, what they did is they started this quite a number of years ago, like 30 years ago, when they started doing narcissism personality tests. Barry's simple little like 10 questions to incoming college freshmen across the United States from every demographic and every zip code. We're talking 1000s of kids, and they began to see a trend that really started to hit around the year 2000, where empathy started to go down 40% in 30 years, and narcissism I'm better than you went up 58%. And they're realizing that it wasn't their DNA that was making a difference. It was very often the culture, we were raising our kids so that they started to look at so what the heck happened around the year 2000. And they began to see a seismic shift in culture. It was really the year where our kids started to looking down at screens as opposed to up at each other and you don't learn empathy from an emoji. We started to look at just the culture of character, beginning to be dormant. We're looking at David Brooks studies that showed that even character in literature, terms like caring and kind and responsible was going down in our children's books. And the novels we read. Well, narcissism was going up, it isn't one thing. It's a multitude of factors that's creating this. Why is it and now all of a sudden, it's a red flag for us to go. If it's going down, then we also can take it up. So what do we do? Well,

Maria Ross 10:00

I love that. And I love that perspective of, and this idea that looking at not just talking to people and asking them, do you feel less or more empathetic than other people, but looking at all these social and media factors as well, and seeing, you know, tracing back what was going on at that time, so that I can understand how we got into this for exactly the reason you just said, so we can get out of it?

Dr. Michele Borba 10:25

Well, the thing that we also have to keep in mind is that the culture is not going to change and go back. Right, you know, Mayberry RFD is gone. So now we need to look at if the culture is definitely switching. So to our parenting on our relationship skills need to switch with it, because we are clearly in an accelerated fast paced, digitally driven world, and it's here to stay. Therefore, what do we want, we want the human side of us all to remain. And that means we need do a little bit more work. When I wrote the unselfie, I didn't realize the impact of all of this until I started digging and digging deeper and deeper. And I began to realize this is extremely doable. That all we need to do is weave it in and make sure we're looking at evidence based proven simple strategies. In all fairness to a parent, it's like, oh, my gosh, I don't have time to do one more thing. And I realize that we're all stressed to the max. But what I also will tell you, I don't care if you're in a business, or you're in a home or you're in a corporate world, these are very simple things. And behavior is always changeable. The key is being really intentional about what's the one little thing you want to switch. And then every day work on that one little thing, even if it's one, two or three minutes, make it simple, think big, start small, get your foot in the door, but keep doing the same thing over and over again, you create a new habit, then you can add the next and the next.

Maria Ross 11:48

I love that. So in thrivers, you talk about the seven most crucial character strengths that boost resilience, peak performance and well being and how they were selected. That applies to children that applies to adults or adults, we want folks to check out your book thrivers. But can you give us a little taste? Can you give us an amuse boosh on one or two of them, and why they're so important? Well,

Dr. Michele Borba 12:09

the first thing is when I began to see I wrote thrivers, it came out, actually the month COVID hit. And I had been interviewing hundreds of kids and I began to see a trend at the CDC said that one in five American kids was going to suffer from some kind of mental health disorder, we're now looking at one in three, a crisis only amplified a pre existing issue. So don't go blaming COVID for it all, he was already there. My next thing does to look at what I don't think is in enough of our parenting or our business books of what really does boost resilience. And there's phenomenally fascinating research that looking at from me Warner just so you know, there's real life names of these researchers for their entire life on norm Gurmeet, Z, Michael Rutter, and Madsen who had been looking at cohorts of children, despite homelessness or poverty, or sexual abuse, some do endure, some do bounce back. And they're looking at the same kids me wonder for 40 years. And she's looking at them as they grow up and go, Oh, my gosh, some of them did make it now the key question is the why. And what I did simply is keep looking at though, what do all of these studies have in common, and that's what I chose seven strains, they had to all be teachable, they were not locked into DNA. And it was never too late. I don't care if you're 45, or you're three, you can still teach these things to kids. It starts with confidence and knowing who you really are and what your strengths are. But the second one, in no order, by the way was empathy. It

kept coming up that resilient people are socially competent, it does not mean that we have 50,000 friends, but we have the ability to connect with others. And we now know that not only here's the other thing does that help us just boost our well being. But it also to a teacher listening helps the kid become more engaged and a deeper learner in the classroom. Number three, for a business person, that's the exact kind of person you want to employ. Because that's the person who is going to be able to step into your clients shoes, your customers shoes, and create this culture that's more conducive to the workplace. And mainly you worried about mental health. Even the Surgeon General right now will tell you it is probably the most highly correlated trait of what's going to help us all get along the happier and live a longer life. It's empathy. 101

Maria Ross 14:32

Do you see where I lose heart is seeing what's going on with adults that are modeling down behavior for children right now? And what's going on in our media landscape and our political landscape? Yes. Do you have hope? Do you feel like

Dr. Michele Borba 14:48

this is like oh, yes, yes, yes. And the only reason I have hope is that I don't listen to the adults attack to the kids at every single time. I mean, even yesterday, I was talking to two teens and I went oh my god. yourself, you're gonna save the world. Yeah, they were they were Philadelphia, they were concerned about violence and shootings, one of their sisters had been stabbed at a school. And what they are doing as a project at their school is studying how to rectify it. And they said, we've listened to every one of your tapes, we've listened to out, read all of your books. And now we want to figure out how do we help our generation I said, you've already helped me because there is hope. They actually came up with solutions and ideas. Every single week, I talked to teens, they're there, they also tell me, you know, we are the most stressed out generation. And I want to mention this, because stress has a lot to do with empathy. If stress continues to build, and you don't have healthy ways to tune it down, what happens you dial your empathy down, to be in survival mode to help your stress. And then after a while, what happens is, the stress keeps building until burnout is the outcome can because you've left empathy, dormant. So notice, that's what the other thing that's happening across the board, the final thing is, we know something else about empathy and stress. And that is the news that we watch can really impact our view of the world and our optimism and hope for the world. Our empathy goes dormant when all you see is the bad stuff. But I always say, number one, I finally did something profound, and subscribe to a newspaper. Because all of the research was telling me if I watch the videos and the late breaking news, they're the reason why the reporters will say, We warn you that the now it's I like rats, and they are what they actually do is take your empathy and your optimism down your newspaper, read it because and read it with your kids expose them to the world, but it's less graphic and less damaging to your empathy. The next thing is I always tell I don't care if you're again 93. Or you're dealing with a five year old, cut out the good stuff that's happening in the world is on the back pages of the newspaper. And it's called good news. I talked to two teens a day or so tired of the dismal news. They convinced their superintendent, this is in Long Island to put a plasma TV as you walk in the front door. I said What the heck are you watching on TV says don't worry about Dr. Ball are about watching Good stuff. She's putting good news videos. So every day when we walk in, we just walk in, we look up, we put our arms around each other thumbs up, keep on going. Because it's news about crises. I don't care what the crisis is. But there's always in a crisis, the good stuff of people, and we never see the good, we only see

the dismal. That's one thing we got to do for our empathy. And it's real simple. Watch what you view. Be selective. Middle school kids say that that late breaking news is the scariest thing that's happening to them if there's not an adult there to watch it. But it's also the scariest thing that's happening to the grown ups to Oh,

Maria Ross 17:47

completely. And I did a I did an interview with Gina Valaria that I'll link to in the show notes where we talked about the state of journalism and the role of empathy in journalism. And that was another big part of the finding, obviously, bad news and fear drives ratings. And so that's why you see so much of this drives eyeballs, it drives clicks. And so it's a game for US companies. But if you are if you are more intentional and thoughtful about where what you consume, and the sources from where you consume it, yes, you actually can strengthen those ties strengthen those that that feeling of community with other people, and not feel so like, well, it's every man for themselves or every person for themselves. Look at the thriver

Dr. Michele Borba 18:27

traits, there's seven of them. We talked about competence, we talked about empathy. Number seven is optimism and hope. Empathy and optimism today together are real change makers. But if you're only seeing the doom and gloom, it's going to take your empathy down. So that's why if you pair any of these character strengths together, you it creates what I call a multiplier effect. I always thought one trade alone was gonna do it, when I realized empathy by itself doesn't help. But number three of the seven traits of self control, if I can find ways to reduce my stress, it's going to keep my empathy open, that's going to help me be healthier, as well as relate better to others. It's always two together, Curiosity is number five. If you've got empathy and curiosity, you are a change maker be crazy, because it's going to keep you open to ideas and possibilities. I always tell kids, you don't have to agree with what the person is saying. But try to hear where they're coming from.

Maria Ross 19:23

Right try to understand their context. Yeah, I will step into their shoes and

Dr. Michele Borba 19:27

be a little bit more aware of where they're coming from an empathy by itself or appear in Lagos or a business person that can't possibly agree with where he's coming from. Right. Right. But you can do a deep canvassing, which means try to find one thing that's common. If you are a struggling student. You want somebody to empathize with you. But the kid who's a straight A student is not going to empathize with a struggling kid. So you did you flip it a little more and you go, Okay, well, let's stretch that think of one moment that you did struggle, maybe it's when you took the dance class. Or maybe you weren't so good at art, there's where you struggled. And that's the same struggle that that kid is facing, but he's facing because of his math class. Now, all of a sudden, it opens it up. And then you can do the same thing, as a business person, or as a parent, you may not be able to step into the shoes right away with that with your child, or your spouse, or your, you know, your business associate, then dig a little deeper, do a little more canvassing, try to come with one commonality and it'll start you being able to come to grips with, I guess we're a little more together. And with

Maria Ross 20:42

absolutely, it's stating those obvious, common shared goals, I often talk in my workshops, when you I'm saying you're having a contentious conversation with someone or you have to work on a project with someone who you don't agree with. First of all, the goal of the conversation doesn't always have to be conversion to my point of view, it can be just understanding what the other person's context is, and say, I still don't agree with you. But I do understand now where you're coming from. And then you can find common ground and stating that common ground out loud, even if it's completely obvious, we're both here, because we don't want to get fired tomorrow, right? Like, can we agree that we're both on the same team, right, answer that. And so it's those little moments of finding that commonality. That just, I feel like change the tenor of the conversation and the exchange, so that you can start to put your defenses down, and not say, I have to be right, and here's why you're wrong, and, you know, pushing against each other all the time. So I think that's, you know, I spend a lot of my time busting myths within the workplace, that empathy is not agreeing with people. It's not caving in to crazy demands. And it's not even just being nice. That's not the same thing as empathy. So I love what you're saying about this idea and applying this to children. And I do want to give another shout out to a past episode, I did that I will also link in the show notes with Eric Dawson, the founder of peace first, which is a global nonprofit devoted to empowering youth changemakers, to come up with their own solutions and build their own projects in their community. And he often talks about the fact that, you know, when you're looking for solutions to problems in the community, ask the young people, they have the ideas,

Dr. Michele Borba 22:16

because they're all i Listen, I have ever Dawson's work, I've worked with him in the past. And when we look at a thrivers. And we look at a kid who has resilience, the commonality to me when you say what that driver is a kid who has agency, he does it on his own. It's not a kid who's waiting for mom to rescue me or dad to do it for me. And one of the best ways you can develop agency is Be the change maker, find the project that drives you just like I was talking to the two kids last night, they were passionate about figuring out how to solve a violence in schools, because it had driven them their own sister was attack. So there's where your purpose and your passion is. Your purpose is what also drives your confidence level. That's number one, see, all those traits start to work together, they really do have a spillover effect. And in the end, what you have is a child who thinks we not me, because not there to say I can make a difference of the world. And there's no better stress reducer than you go, I got this, I can do it. raves will only begin to see I can make a change.

Maria Ross 23:22

Right? I can be in control of the situation. Yeah. So that leads me and this is a great segue into the last question and one I personally am interested in as the mom to a nine year old boy, who I keep trying to get to see other perspectives and get involved and find projects, things like that. What are some, as you said, practical evidence based simple ways to cultivate children's empathy and resilience. But we know we're also talking about adults as well. Oh, absolutely. Let's look at let's look at what are a few of those. Yeah, well, the number one is

Dr. Michele Borba 23:53

what's the gateway to empathy, and its emotional literacy. You can't feel with somebody else unless you go, he looks sad, and she sounds frustrated and he looks upset. So the first natural thing to do not at

six o'clock when you're doing motional literacy, but weaving it in is to naturally talk feelings far more with your kids. As you watch inside out as you read a book, how would you feel if that happened to you? You start with a How would you feel? What does he What would you need? What does he do? And then you can switch that up a notch? I love Martin Hoffman's work, because he said once you ask the How would you feel and what would you need? You take it up a notch and that is what does he need? How does he feel? What can you do and you're now on a different level. Inductive discipline seems to be highly correlated to raising children who are more empathetic and also better behaved. Every time your child crosses over the line is your wonderful moment. I don't care if your child has a toddler routine to say an inductive discipline is I'm really upset with that particular behavior. Behavior, not the trial, because in this house, he is Here's what we expect, remember our rules? How would that other kids feel that you did that? So what are you going to do differently next time? Timeout doesn't work, because you're not talking about what are you going to do differently next time. But if you draw the empathy towards your discipline, Martin Hoffman says, from 40 years of research, you actually have a child beginning to think a little stronger and get into the shoes of the other. Here's another one, this is York University. Read, read, and don't stop reading to your children. Or get yourself into a literary book club, or just read good literary fiction. And I'm not talking 50 Shades of Grey, on out all the light, you cannot see our Belcanto they have found that when you adults get into the shoes of someone else, what begins to happen is your own empathy levels go up. But you can do the same thing. Ask yourself as we if you are a parent, why do you think that children love the book, wonder and Harry Potter better than any other books out there, because they're very empathy driven. And it's helping a child step outside his shoes into the shoes of others. Here's another tip, there are so many tips, don't try them all. Or your kid will never let you lead listen to another podcast. But go one step at a time that you're more likely to empathize with those like you, my race, my gender, my age, my culture, what we've got to do if we want we kind of thinkers is helped stretch our kids too. If you're reading books, and you're you've got a son, and make sure that those books also have a different gender. If you have a you are Catholic, and make sure you're exposing your kids do to Jews or Muslims step outside different food groups, different museums are wonderful, because they're emotive, you can go to so many wonderful museums, and you can actually step into the shoes of someone, Mike, my favorite museum that every year, I'm in Washington, DC, I go to the Holocaust Museum. And I do it because one, one room that's called Daniels row, I go to that room each time, I already know what's going to be in it. I go there to follow kids who haven't been through the museum and watch them physically change and what they've created. As for children walking through that museum, they don't understand what it was like to be Jewish and live during the Holocaust. And so the whole museum is set up looking like it's Daniel, he's about your age. And here's his room. And here's his toys. And here's his classmates. The first thing is, it's quiet and you begin to go, Oh, he's just like me, he reads the same stop, he's got the same bed, he's got the same thing. And now all of a sudden, you keep on walking in. Now there are signs that say no Jews allowed and you begin to go, Dan is not being treated fairly, until you go to the next room. And there's Oh, Daniels told to pack up until at the very end, it's quite a distance. The whole museum gets colder. This the lighting gets down. And now you're at the Holocaust. And every single time I hear kids in front of me start to shutter, oh, my gosh, Daniel didn't go there, Diddy, they start to hold on to each other. There's Kleenex and the kids start to cry. And the last room is pencil and paper, write a note to Daniel. And every single time kids go, Daniel, this should never have happened. Not on my watch. It won't happen again, Daniel, I'm there for you. And what happens is kids begin to step into something outside themselves, they begin to see a different view and they want to make a change. That's what we need to

do. I'm not saying you have to go to a museum, right. But I am saying we need to expose our kids to differences. And we need to expose ourselves to differences, right? We also finally need to be aware of the people we're around and examples. Because one of the best ways to cultivate empathy. I learned this from looking at phenomenal research from Samuel holiner. He looked at people who are all through us. And he found three things, what creates a real owl turret? How about Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust? Three things they all said, I was raised to either have empathy or social responsibility. But in my home, there was always examples of it. I watched my mom or dad and they showed and demonstrated kindness or your children seeing that in you or in others. It was expected in my home that you are expected to be kind is that your expectation? Or is that expectation in your business. And third is their worst experiences. I didn't start by trying to save a life. My parents said let's bake some cookies for the neighbor next door. Or let's give a quote to the man who's homeless down the end of the street. And it was always the look in the person's eyes of gratitude that I said I had to do it again and again. And what you do is you create a little change maker, and it's not too late for any of us simple little things we can do to make a difference in the world.

Maria Ross 29:53

I love it. Thank you so much, Michelle, for your insights today and for spending some time with us. Talking about these valuable lessons of how to teach children empathy. But as I said, we also can learn from this ourselves. And it's never too late to strengthen that empathy muscle, even if it's atrophied a bit, depending on your upbringing, or your job environment, or wherever you've been. So, thank you so much. I hope everyone will check out the books thrivers and unselfie. I'll have links in the show notes. I'll have all your contact links in the show notes as well. But for anyone listening to us on the go, where's the best place they can find out more about you and your world?

Dr. Michele Borba 30:31

Well, thank you for that my web. I'm Michele Borba. I'm a one Alma shell and my last name Bordeaux. Right. So just go to Michele borba.com. And you'll find dozens of lengths videos and handouts that you can

Maria Ross 30:43

use. And we will have a link to that to one hour. Michelle, I love it. Thank you so much for your time today. You're welcome. And thank you everyone for listening to another episode of the empathy edge podcast. If you like what you heard you know what to do, please rate and review and share it with a friend or a colleague. And until next time, remember that cash flow creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind.

Maria Ross 31:13

For more on how to achieve radical success through empathy, visit the empathy edge.com. There you can listen to past episodes, access shownotes and free resources. Book me for a Keynote or workshop and sign up for our email list to get new episodes insights, news and events. Please follow me on Instagram at Red slice Maria. Never forget empathy is your superpower. Use it to make your work and the world a better place.