“Empathy is at the heart of what it means to be human,” state Weissbourd and Jones in the Harvard Graduate School of Education *Making Caring Common Project.*  “Empathy is a key part of building a community of respect and kindness. Empathy can help us to value others, prevent bullying, and increase positive relationships.”

Because of these beliefs founded in research, Weissbourd and Jones have created five guideposts to help parents and educators cultivate empathy in children. Over the next 5 months, each Parents, Did You Know? column will present one of the five guideposts in hopes that, with the home and school working together, more of our children will learn how to take another person’s perspective and respond with compassion. Here is Guidepost #1, taken from *How Parents Can Cultivate Empathy in Children* (Weissbourd and Jones, *Making Caring Common Project,* Harvard Graduate School of Education):

GUIDEPOST #1: Empathize with your child and model empathy for others

“Children learn empathy both from watching us and from experiencing our empathy for them. When we empathize with our children they develop trusting, secure attachments with us. Those attachments are key to their wanting to adopt our values and to model *our* behavior, and therefore to building their empathy for others.

Empathizing with our children takes many forms, including tuning in to their physical and emotional needs, understanding and respecting their individual personalities, taking a genuine interest in their lives, and guiding them toward activities that reflect an understanding of the kind of people they are and the things they enjoy.

Children also learn empathy by watching those *we* notice and appreciate. They’ll notice if we treat a server in a restaurant or a mail carrier as if they’re invisible. On the positive side, they’ll notice if we welcome a new family in our child’s school or express concern about another child in our child’s class who is experiencing one challenge or another.

Finally, it’s important for us to recognize what might be getting in the way of our empathizing. Are we, for example, exhausted or stressed? Does our child push our buttons in a specific way that makes caring for her or him hard at times?”

SUGGESTIONS TO PARENTS:

*Know your child*. “Ask your child questions. For example, what did you learn today that was interesting? What was the hardest part of your day? How would you most like to spend a day if you could do anything? Do you have a friend that you especially respect? Why do your respect that person?”

*Demonstrate empathy for others, including those different from you*. “Consider regularly engaging in community service or model other ways of contributing to a community. Even better, consider doing this with your child. Express interest in those from various backgrounds facing many different types of challenges.”

*Engage in self-care and self-reflection*. “Try to find time to regularly engage in an activity — whether it’s going for a walk, reading a book, meditating or praying — that can help you avoid being overwhelmed by stress. Reflect and consult with people you trust when you’re having a hard time empathizing with your child.”