

## **Circle the Wagons. How children learn to express empathy.**

By [Betsy Brown Braun](#) on Apr.29, 2013.

Betsy Brown Braun, Best- Selling Author, Parent Educator, Child Development and Behavior Specialist. Local to LA. Offers private practice, in person, phone, Skype, face time, goggle + available anytime anywhere. Check out her website for more information: Parenting Pathways. Inc.  
[www.bestybrownbraun.com](http://www.bestybrownbraun.com)

**Current research on the topic of empathy in children points to likelihood that infants as young as 6 months have the ability to demonstrate empathy. Whether or how empathy develops as the child grows is a whole different story. Here we go again, nature vs nurture. A recent experience points to an answer.**

**Shockingly, I recently stared cancer in the face. Even I, the healthiest person I know, did not escape the reach of the Big C. A totally successful surgery was followed by a less successful post op experience, and I found myself having a second surgery to deal with life threatening complications. Thankfully, all of that is history. And I am well on the mend, but that is not the point.**

**A professional nurturer, my career is built around helping people. Being in the position of needing help and support was new territory. As I spiraled downhill, I had no choice. First it was my own adult children who stepped up to the plate. Home they flew, as my husband cut short his Asian business trip and raced to the homestead. Role reversal: they all took over. The second team, all my dear friends, was close behind. As did the pioneers to protect against danger, they circled the wagons. They buoyed me in a way I have never experienced.**

**And as word spread, in droves clients far and wide ran to give their support and love—cards, notes, emails, phones calls, errands, a home filled with flowers, a refrigerator spilling chicken soup and fare from the finest eateries, and gifts to pamper a healing body. The outpouring of love and support was beyond any I could have imagined. Talk about a show of empathy.**

**A mom client sent me a lovely handmade card. Included in her well-wishes was the story of her weeping when she read the news of my illness and her son asking what was wrong. She shared with him the story of Betsy and how sad it made her. Together they made my special card.**

**While children might be predisposed to being empathetic, it is clear to me that active empathy is cultivated and nurtured when practiced daily in the home.**

**When your child's playdate gets canceled, do you assuage his disappointment with an outing to the park? Empathy would be taught by instead making a card or baking a batch of cookies for the sick playmate. The parent who bakes an extra loaf of banana bread for the ill neighbor, the father who includes the child of an absent parent in his family's weekend outing, the mother who creates a garden bouquet or makes a meal for a grieving family—all model and thereby teach empathy.**

**Last week I chatted with the daughter of a dear colleague whose husband just died. I shared how taken I was the awe-inspiring attentiveness shown by her and her brother as Wally was dying,**

**sleeping every night with their mother, taking care of all communications and details for her. Shana's reply? "My mama taught me."**

**Can there be any question who is a child's first teacher of empathy?**

- See more at: <http://betsybrownbraun.com/2013/04/29/circle-the-wagons-how-children-learn-to-express-empathy/#sthash.3kGu4vOk.dpuf>