

Double Empathy Problem

What is the double empathy problem?

The 'double empathy problem' was coined by autistic researcher Damian Milton in 2012. It suggests that communication breakdowns occur not only due to an autistic person's "social communication difficulties," but also because non-autistic individuals have difficulties understanding autistic people. It proposes that the disconnect in communication is mutual and can happen at various levels, from spoken language to non-spoken communication (e.g. facial expressions and social cues).

Why is it important?

The double empathy problem emphasizes the need to consider both sides of social interactions and highlights that autistic people have their unique way of communicating. Recent studies (as of 2021) indicate that the majority of autistic individuals can socialize, communicate effectively, empathize, and demonstrate social reciprocity with fellow autistic individuals.

An autistic person's unique way of communicating or socializing should be understood and respected, rather than treated as "deficient." Breakdowns between autistic people and non-autistic people are not one-sided, and they are not solely the autistic person's responsibility to repair.

What can we do?

Parents, professionals, and caregivers can work together to bridge the communication gap and foster a more empathetic and inclusive environment, ultimately improving social interactions for all children involved.

Action Steps

- 1 Educate and Raise Awareness**
Help children, both autistic and non-autistic, understand the concept of the 'double empathy problem.' Explain that people may communicate in unique ways.
- 2 Model Acceptance and Inclusion**
Encourage an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated. Teach children to embrace differences and appreciate the strengths each individual brings to the table.
- 3 Teach Communication Skills and Self-Advocacy**
Provide both autistic and non-autistic children with tools and strategies to improve self-advocacy and overall communication skills, e.g. using clear and direct language, using visual aids, etc.
- 4 Encourage Perspective Taking**
Help children see situations from the perspective of others, through storytelling, role-playing, engaging in empathy-building exercises, etc.
- 5 Facilitate Shared Interests**
Find common interests between children and create opportunities for shared activities. Engaging in enjoyable activities together can strengthen connections and foster understanding.