Sometimes we worry about our kids not because they’re suffering, or alone, but because they can seem so self-centered, so unconcerned about how other people feel.

Certainly some kids have more innate capacity for empathy than others and some people’s development can’t be rushed. But is there anything we as adults can do to help?

Some adolescents appear not to understand what loneliness is like because they never have to be alone. Popular, outgoing... what luck!

But even teenagers who have a solid group of friends can experience intermittent feelings of loneliness. It might take an adult to name that experience, however, because it doesn’t readily occur to a young teenager that if she’s surrounded by friends, she might still feel lonely, or how that happens.

An adult can help sort through and name possibilities. For example, sometimes it’s because those friends don’t know what she’s going through, or they know, but don’t seem to understand. (There can be underlying causes, too, such as depression or anxiety; if the experience of loneliness—whether in the presence of others or not—becomes prevalent, it merits deeper exploration and, maybe, a consultation with a qualified therapist.)

We can help our kids identify the nature of their experiences. We can then point out how another person might feel similarly even under different circumstances (e.g., that kid you walk past at lunch is probably lonely a lot more often than you are because he’s never surrounded by friends.). In doing this, we help our children build cognitive and emotional connections between and among their own thoughts and feelings, and between their experiences and the experiences of others.

We can’t mandate empathy, but we can try to help our adolescents’ capacities unfold.

Dr. Wilner offers parenting insights in her online forum, “Conversations with Parents,” at www.BeyondDifferences.org/resources/parentresources/. Click on “Tips for Parents.”

We appreciate President Clinton’s support for Beyond Differences!