

The Roots of Empathy

Introduction

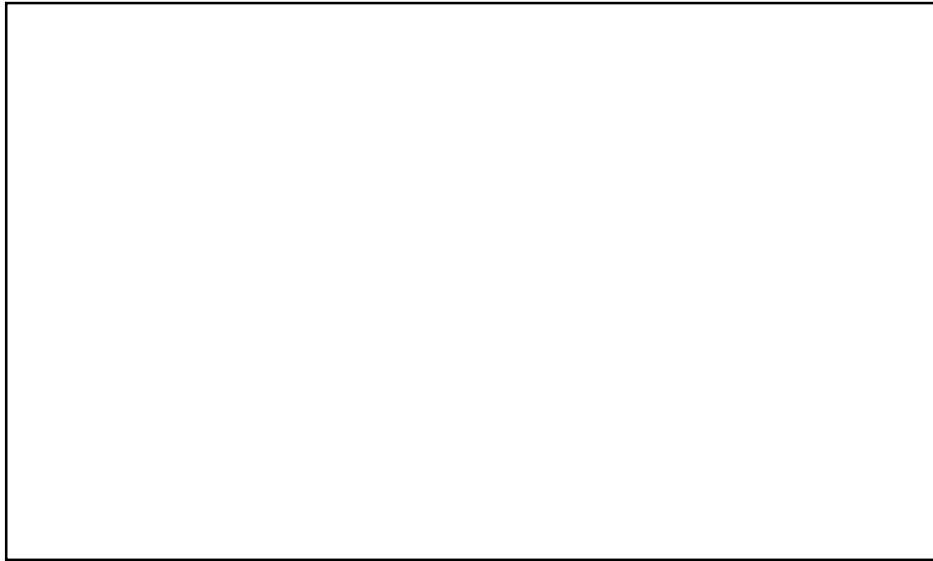
The Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based parenting program designed for elementary school students. The program, developed and written by Mary Gordon, has as its cornerstone a monthly classroom visit by an infant and parent. Bi-monthly class visits from a Roots of Empathy instructor foster empathy skills through discussion and activities which are based on the infant-parent visit. During these visits, the baby becomes the focus of the class activities in which students learn from guided observation how to read a baby's cues and respond appropriately. In addition, students chronicle the baby's physical growth and milestones. Through interaction with the baby, students learn to develop their own sense of taking another person's perspective (empathy).

The goals of the Roots of Empathy program are to increase levels of empathy in children and to develop an appreciation and understanding of human development. Empathy and a knowledge of child development are two key determinants of effective parenting. When levels of empathy increase, levels of aggression decrease. The program fosters problem-solving skills, and oral language and communication skills while intro-

ducing activities which complement the classroom curriculum. The program also has a long-term goal of preparing children for competent and caring parenting.

The program has run successfully in inner-city schools of the former Toronto Board of Education (presently the Toronto District School Board) since 1996. Currently, there are 18 programs being offered at primary, junior and senior grade levels. The Roots of Empathy team is composed of the Roots of Empathy instructor, the classroom teacher, and a parent and infant. The program takes place during classroom hours and is planned and implemented with the classroom teacher.

The curriculum includes instruction on infant development, behaviour and care. A parallel curriculum on the social and emotional development of the student runs in tandem. Roots of Empathy is funded by a private foundation. The cost of one program, for one year, is approximately \$3,500. Only one person is hired – a Roots of Empathy instructor who is usually a primary school teacher on leave or an early childhood educator with classroom management skills. The program is offered from September to June.



Through interaction with the baby, students learn to develop their own sense of taking another person's perspective (empathy).

History of Roots of Empathy

In 1996, the Maytree Foundation approached Mary Gordon, the Parenting Programs Administrator for the Toronto District School Board, about starting a classroom-based parenting program. The Foundation was aware of the quiet success of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres where Mary had worked for 15 years in inner-city settings, helping and supporting families to improve their parenting skills.

Mary was given the responsibility of establishing the Parenting Centres in 1981 because the Toronto Board of Education was concerned with the high rate of failure among inner-city students. A body of research available at the time identified parental involvement as the crucial element in the academic success of students; however, if the parents had low levels of literacy and could not speak English, it was very difficult for them to engage in the education system. This research was used in developing an intervention that would reduce the very high failure rate of inner-city students.

Parents in inner-city areas are often reluctant to trust the schools. Mary Gordon's suggestion was to invite parents with preschoolers – infants to 4-year-olds – to come into the school for a program of activities which parents could enjoy with their babies, while providing them with support for their parenting. Gordon notes: "If we could get families into schools early, rubbing shoulders with staff, it would boost their confidence. The school would come to understand the culture of their community and the values of the families. When the little ones started school, the parents would feel comfortable with the school system."

Through her work with the Parenting Centres, Mary saw how the motivation to learn was greatest when the parent was the teacher. She explains: "My interest was to take the model of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres and make it work in a classroom setting. We wanted to work with children who may not have had a good start in life and who perhaps did not have empathy because they had not experienced it. The greatest engine to jump-start learning is the love

and intimacy between parent and child. The centrepiece of the Roots of Empathy program is the parent-infant visit.”

The Parenting Centres grew from a scant five in 1981 to 34 in 1998. Seven thousand families numbering 11,000 children go through the centres every year. While these centres are universally accessible, they reach out strategically to high-risk families. There is no stigma attached to the centres; they are seen as a vibrant school/community program.

In the classroom

The Roots of Empathy program is composed of three elements: a one-time pre-program home visit, monthly classroom family visits from a neighbourhood parent and infant, and bimonthly classroom visits by the Roots of Empathy instructor.

i. pre-program home visit

In September, the Roots of Empathy instructor identifies a local parent with an infant between the ages of 2 and 4 months. The idea behind having such a young infant is to show students the enormous milestones achieved in the first year of life. The first year is the most vulnerable year in the life span. Incidents of child abuse, including shaken baby syndrome, are most prevalent in the first year.

The Roots of Empathy instructor visits with the parent and infant in their home and prepares the parent for the classroom appointment by ensuring that the parent understands the developmental information that will be taught. The instructor takes pictures of the baby in his or her home to use as an introduction to the students before the first visit to the classroom in late Sep-

tember. The parent and instructor also catch up on the baby’s most recent developments.

ii. monthly classroom family visits

The monthly visits are scripted in the sense that a lesson plan is prepared to match the age of the baby and the age of the students. For example, if the baby is 9 months old, milestones typical of that stage are taught. Students learn about the unique temperament of ‘their’ baby in addition to the development and behaviour expected for the age. One important milestone is the baby’s dawning of memory or ‘object permanence.’ Kindergarten children explore this milestone with very different activities than do Grade 8 students.

“One Roots of Empathy exercise has kids asking their parents about their personal histories. What a lot of kids get from this activity is the feeling that they were special from day one. Several of my students are very difficult, demanding children. Often they feel that their relationships with their parents are strained. A number of the kids have been through parental separations or multiple step-parents, so their sense of themselves as people who are important is nonexistent. When they were interviewing their parents about the details of their births, how they got their names or their parents’ hopes for them, many found out that there was a wealth of concern and caring, even though some days it might look like the opposite.”

– Brian Chant, teacher

Even though there is a lesson plan with specific teaching topics for each month, the spontaneous nature of the baby’s interactions actually directs the visit. The parent and Roots of Empathy instructor guide the students’ observations of what the baby is doing and explore what he or she is feeling and why. This enables the Roots of

Empathy instructor to discuss the baby's temperament with the parent in front of the students as they observe how the parent responds to the baby's cues.

A key value of the program is to highlight local parents and to celebrate the diversity of the community. A loving parent-infant relationship transcends language and financial barriers. Roots of Empathy students learn from the heart.

Father-infant teams are emphasized to show how fathers can be nurturing parents. About one-third of visiting parents are dads. One of the first Roots of Empathy parents was a Chinese father who spoke very little English. His six-year-old daughter was delighted to interpret for her father when he made visits to her kindergarten class.

The Roots of Empathy instructor also guides the children's observations about the baby's drive to explore or to practise a new skill he or she is perfecting. Rolling over or pulling to stand up are examples of practice play. Each stage of

development is discussed along with the new safety concerns which accompany it.

iii. bimonthly classroom visits

The Roots of Empathy instructor visits the class twice a month without the infant and parent present. The purpose of these visits is to consolidate the observations and learnings of the family visit.

The lesson plans for the class visits are designed to capitalize on the shared observations of the family visit. Age appropriate activities support the concepts to be taught to students. During these classes, the substantive work of teaching empathy takes place. The Roots of Empathy instructor revisits the interactions of the family visit and draws comments from students. If the baby cries during the visit, for example, the teacher might ask the students to try to remember why the baby cried and how the parent comforted the child. This shared experience is then made relevant to the students' own lives.



During a classroom visit without the baby, the Roots of Empathy instructor organizes activities that promote an understanding of human development.

The Roots of Empathy instructor is vigilant in honouring all students' comments. She validates their opinions and fosters a safe environment for sharing feelings. Emotional literacy is the backdrop for every class visit.

“There was a boy in Grade 8 at one of our most impoverished inner-city schools. He really didn't have many social skills, was very gruff in his presentation, and had rather poor language skills. He was labelled as ‘a difficult child.’ After the third baby visit that year, just as the mother and infant were leaving, he approached them and said, ‘I've brought this teddy bear for the baby.’ This is a child of a single mother living on government support in subsidized housing. The boy had saved all of the change that he was given and gone out and purchased a toy for the baby. Well, the mother cried on the spot. This child previously hadn't had a forum to display who he was. He had been labelled as a troublemaker and had played the role. Here was a chance for him to show that he is an empathetic human being.”

– Mary Gordon

Drama, visual arts, poetry, journal writing, music, research, problem-solving and mathematics are used to link the messages of the Roots of Empathy class to the curriculum. The creative activities engage hand, heart and mind. Students delight in creating presents for their babies. Class ‘peek-a-boo’ books are made for which each student contributes a page. Photos of the children and the infant are compiled into a large story-book and the children help compose the text.

Children of all ages revel in writing poetry for ‘their’ baby. Major differences are apparent in the theme and illustrations of the girls and boys in elementary school. The boys tend to write action-packed poems or stories, while the girls write relationship-based stories and poems with peaceful, decorative illustrations.

Children's recollections of nursery rhymes and songs that they learned at home make a wonderful montage of the students' early childhood memories. The teachers are particularly touched by this exercise as well as the activity which involves students asking their parents how they chose the child's birth name. When students check with their families to help with these early memories, a positive connection is made with the home and school.

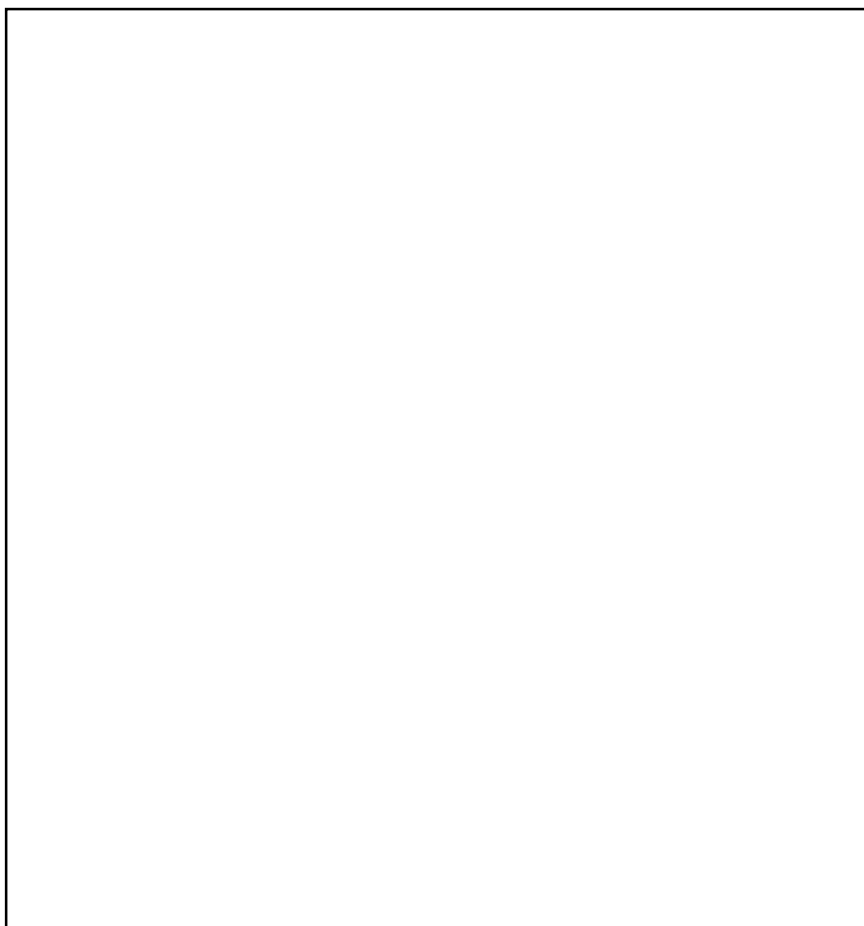
Another popular activity is to present students with photos of children who look fearful or sad. Students are asked to project why the child is sad and how they might help. The kindness of children grows in this empathy exercise.

Brain development

The teacher discusses brain research with the children so that all the students in the Roots of Empathy classrooms will appreciate the marvel and power of learning that takes place in this critical infancy period. The three requirements for optimal brain development are: good nutrition, good nurturance and good stimulation. The parent-child relationship is crucial for optimal brain development. More neural connections are created in the baby's brain as a result of sensory experiences in the first year than at any other time in the human life span. When students observe responsive, loving parents, they see how a baby really learns. When these students grow up to be parents, they will remember that although babies do not talk in the first year of life, all those “ah goos” count for something and are important.

Evaluation: some highlights

A formal evaluation component was included in last year's implementation of the



Children delight in writing poetry for 'their' baby.

Roots of Empathy program at Parkdale Public School, one of Toronto's inner-city schools. A number of quantitative and qualitative measures were used to assess the impact of the program on students. These measures include pre- and post-assessments, classroom observations, anecdotes and surveys.

An analysis of the pre- and post-assessment data clearly shows that, by the end of the project, the students who took part in the program had made significant gains over their peers in the control group, especially with respect to two criteria. Participating students demonstrated a better understanding of a baby's development and safety, as well as an increased level of empathy. This increase was apparent by their shift from

focussing merely on the baby's physical needs at the beginning of the program to becoming more aware of and sensitive to the baby's emotional needs.

According to our researchers' classroom observations, program participants responded enthusiastically to the baby visits and became more interested and engaged in the sessions as the program progressed. They participated by asking intelligent questions and giving sensible responses. Some children even reflected on and shared their personal experiences with the class. Researchers and teachers further noted that students who seemed apathetic initially or who tended to be physically aggressive also had expressed their interest and sensitivity spontaneously through their questions and smiles.

Near the end of the project, both teachers and students were asked to provide their feedback through a short survey. Most students indicated that they enjoyed the sessions and would like to have them continue on a more frequent basis. All four teachers whose students were involved in the project also agreed that all or most of their students showed interest in the program and that it was highly beneficial. None of the teachers found that the project caused any inconveniences to their classroom activities.

Roots of Empathy is poised to become an international program in 1999-2000. Educators across Canada, the United States, Japan and other parts of the world are expressing interest in the program. Training will be offered to selected schools in Canada in the year 2000. Training teams from schools will include a principal or vice-principal and a teacher. School teams will be presented with strategies for hiring the Roots

of Empathy instructor. Ongoing support will be provided, including visits to participating schools.

Conclusion

The moral argument for teaching empathy is further supported by the biochemical argument. If a child's everyday experiences do not support the development of empathy, the child will learn non-empathic responses which are difficult to 'unlearn.'

If we fail as a society to provide young children with nurturing environments where pro-social skills and empathy can develop, we will pay later in the quality of our citizens.

Mary Gordon is the Founder/Director of the Roots of Empathy and the Parenting Programs Administrator for the Toronto District School Board.

Copyright © 1999 by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7
Ph: (613) 729-3340 Fx: (613) 729-3896
e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
website: <http://www.caledoninst.org>

Social Partnerships Project
Ph: (613) 729-8778 Fx: (613) 729-3896
e-mail: partners@caledoninst.org

Caledon Institute of Social Policy publications are available from:

Renouf Publishing Company Limited
5369 Canotek Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1J 9J3
Ph: (613) 745-2665
Fx: (613) 745-7660

and from Renouf stores at:

71 1/2 Sparks Street, Ottawa Ph: (613) 238-8985
12 Adelaide St. West, Toronto Ph: (416) 363-3171