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CHILD *Links*

EMPATHY

Roots of Empathy

*Developing Empathy,
Reducing Aggression*

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The Innovation

Social entrepreneur and Roots of Empathy founder, Mary Gordon, understood that empathy grew in the first year of life through the secure attachment relationship of a baby and parent. Her ground-breaking idea was to create an evidence-based programme, Roots of Empathy, that focused on this attachment relationship between baby and parent to help to build empathy in children in a classroom. Gordon realised that empathy could not be taught in traditional ways but could be 'caught' through experiential learning. This experiential learning is guided in the classroom by a certified instructor using an age-specific curriculum.

Ms. Gordon began her career as a kindergarten teacher in Toronto, Canada, where she recognised the power of education as an equaliser. She realised that the common denominator in all forms of violence and cruelty, including bullying, is the absence of empathy. Young children need to have a secure attachment in order to thrive. Marginalisation, poor parenting and family violence have devastating impacts on the lives of children. Ms. Gordon wanted to find ways to break the cycle, and thus Roots of Empathy was born. She questioned whether it was possible to help develop empathy, teach emotional literacy and break intergenerational cycles of violence and poor parenting by bringing a baby into the classroom. The attachment relationship between a baby and parent is the first and most powerful model of empathy there is. By leveraging this relationship, Roots of Empathy develops empathy.

In Roots of Empathy we believe that empathy is innate and flourishes or fades in the first year of life. The parent-child attachment relationship is where empathy develops. If it goes awry, a child suffers from an empathy deficit, which may be transmitted generationally. The absence of empathy underlies war, genocide, neglect, racism, abuse, bullying and marginalisation of all kinds. Without empathy, there is insufficient traction for conflict resolution and altruism is not possible.

Empathy is the developmental mechanism that is correlated most highly with altruistic behaviour. It is the ability to take the perspective of the other and to feel with them. Empathy cannot be successfully taught through traditional instruction, but it can be 'caught' experientially, changing the architecture of the brain. If we develop empathy in children, they will be inclusive and challenge cruelty and injustice, creating more peaceful, caring and civil societies. In Roots of Empathy, children find the humanity in the baby and see the baby's right to be included, which is the beginning of understanding that we all have the right to be included. The best way to change tomorrow is to work with the children of

today, creating a change from within that lasts. Roots of Empathy does this by reaching children where they are – in classrooms – changing not only the child, but influencing the teacher and the education system. This is Roots of Empathy's theory of change – that this change from within the child spreads to the school, home and community, breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and, in the long term, creating responsible citizens and responsive parents.

How it Works

Roots of Empathy delivers two programmes – Roots of Empathy, which is delivered to primary school children, and Seeds of Empathy, which is designed for 3–5 year olds in early childhood settings.

Today, Roots of Empathy is delivered internationally in eleven countries around the world – Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, US, New Zealand and Costa Rica, and in every province of Canada. In Ireland, Roots of Empathy is delivered through Barnardos as the lead agency, and reached 2,325 children in the 2016–2017 programme year. Since its Ireland launch in 2011–2012, 12,000 children have participated. In total, Roots of Empathy has reached more than 800,000 children since 1996 and has won numerous best practice awards for innovation in education. Seeds of Empathy, which was introduced in 2005, is delivered in Canada and the US.

Roots of Empathy

Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom programme. In the short term, it has been shown to reduce aggression, including bullying, and to increase prosocial behaviours such as helping, sharing and caring. In the long term, the programme strives to break intergenerational cycles of violence and poor parenting.

Roots of Empathy relies on volunteers from the community. At the heart of the programme are a volunteer neighbourhood parent and baby who visit a classroom throughout the school year. A certified Roots of Empathy instructor, using a curriculum, guides the children to label the baby's feelings and intentions. The children learn to take the perspective of the baby and to feel with the baby. Emotional literacy develops as children begin to identify and label the baby's feelings, reflect on and understand their own feelings, then the feelings of others. Emotional literacy is a first and essential step in learning how to regulate emotions. Children gain further experience in self-regulation as they observe the mother regulating the baby's emotions. At the end of the year this change from within results in an increase in self-regulation, resilience, wellbeing and empathy.

I arrive at my Grade Four Roots of Empathy classroom a few minutes early and wait in the hallway for the door to open. Math class is almost over and Roots of Empathy is next. Smiling faces dart over to the window in the door – the students know I'm there and they can't wait for their lesson with Baby Thomas, his mom Maureen, and me.



Every three weeks, Baby Thomas and his mom joined me on the green blanket with 28 students and their classroom teacher. When Thomas first began his work as a Tiny Teacher, he was just four months old. He couldn't sit or stand or walk. He couldn't crawl. He could hardly hold his head up when laying on his tummy, a position he didn't like at all. He loved being near his mom and she loved holding him. I remember all of this very well because we talked about it in class.

In our year together, the students learned about Baby Thomas's temperament by watching him. He didn't give up trying to grasp a small ball just beyond his reach. We determined that he was persistent. When he finally grabbed the ball, the

students erupted with joy. When he was upset at being placed on his tummy on the green blanket, he fussed, he didn't scream. We determined that he had low intensity, with milder reactions. We saw that when offered new things, such as a food he had never eaten, he was willing to give it a try. We determined his first reaction to new things was adventurous. Even so, Baby Thomas often looked back at his mom for reassurance. We talked about his attachment to Maureen and how her loving and reassuring response helped him move out into the world. We learned that Baby Thomas loved music, especially when mom Maureen would move his body to the songs. We asked Maureen about that and she said she and Thomas attended a weekly neighbourhood music class because he loves music so much. One day Baby Thomas arrived asleep in his stroller. We imagined what it would be like for him to be awakened by a loud welcome song and instead sang quietly. He woke slowly and wide-eyed, ready for his class.

We tracked Thomas's development – how he grew, what he could do now and what he could not do 'yet'. We learned that we all develop at our own unique pace, just as Baby Thomas does.

We looked for his emotional and behavioural cues. As instructor, I guided the children to identify and reflect on Baby Thomas's feelings and then on their own feelings and the feelings of others. They learned that babies cry because they are hungry, but also when they are lonely. They learned that babies smile when they are excited, and when they are included in activities. The children talked about how they feel when they are hungry or tired or lonely or left out.

Our close observations and reflections of Baby Thomas's temperament traits helped us to get to know Baby Thomas – what he needed and wanted. I guided the children to reflect on their own unique temperaments. Were they high or low intensity? Persistent? Did they tend to have cautious or adventurous first reactions? What did they need or want? What, and who, helped them?

All of this happened in a 30–40 minute lesson every three weeks during a school year. Before and after each visit with Baby Thomas and Mom Maureen, I visited the class with curriculum activities to prepare and reinforce the learning. The children were given a safe place to express their feelings through stories, artwork, music and discussion. And they did.

At the end of the school year, when the classroom teacher asked the students what Roots of Empathy meant to them, one boy said 'We are a classroom of caregivers.' This warmed my heart.





The curriculum is comprehensive and divided into themes, which are delivered over the school year. The curriculum is designed developmentally for four age groups, three of which are offered in primary school in the Republic of Ireland. Each visit offers opportunities for learning related to the school curriculum – maths when the children measure the baby’s weight and height, literature when they listen to and reflect on stories, and art, which opens the children to perspective-taking and their feelings. Programme integrity is ensured by following researchers’ gold standards for school-based programmes – an accredited curriculum, a training programme with certification, a mentoring programme, ongoing professional development, evaluation and research.

As children become more competent in understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others they are less likely to physically, psychologically and emotionally hurt one other through bullying and other cruelties. Roots of Empathy is a universal programme where all children benefit, but children who may have experienced violence or who lack a secure attachment see with their own eyes what love looks like. The experiential learning with the parent and infant is biologically embedded in the student’s brain. The brain is changed and each child, including those already at-risk, develops a new norm. The change spreads from child to classroom to home to community, impacting all involved. This is important because empathy transcends race, religion, culture and gender and is a prerequisite for inclusion, building a more caring, peaceful and civil society. Students are our future leaders and will influence their schools, families and communities.

Seeds of Empathy

Seeds of Empathy teaches pre-school children 3–5 years old about feelings – their own feelings and the feelings of others. It takes place in early learning centres, such as daycares and pre-schools and, unlike Roots of Empathy where programme instructors are community volunteers, Seeds of Empathy instructors are centre staff – early childhood educators.

Seeds of Empathy fosters social and emotional competencies and early literacy skills and attitudes in the crucial pre-school years. Children learn how to build positive relationships by understanding their own emotions and those of others. When children know how others feel, they are less likely to use aggression to solve problems and hurt each other through unkind acts.

As with Roots of Empathy, at the heart of the programme is a volunteer neighbourhood parent and baby who visit ten, rather than nine, times during the year. The children are coached to observe the baby’s development and to label the baby’s feelings. In this experiential learning, the baby is the ‘teacher’ and a lever, helping the children to identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others.

In addition to these family visits, Seeds of Empathy themes such as “Baby and Me”, “Feeling Angry” and “Friends” are also introduced and explored through quality children’s literature and an early literacy approach that is based on relationships and interactive activities. Stories help children explore their own feelings and take the perspective of others. This is crucial during the early years. Attitudes to reading are formed early through trusting relationships, which is what makes early childhood educators, who read the stories and guide the children to reflect on their feelings, such powerful role models.

Goals for children in Seeds of Empathy are to foster the development of empathy and emotional literacy, to build social and emotional understanding, to reduce aggression, including bullying, increase prosocial behaviours such as sharing, helping and inclusion, and to develop positive attitudes and competencies in early literacy, all of which prepare pre-school children for the transition to kindergarten.

Very importantly, early childhood educators who are trained to deliver the programme also benefit from Seeds of Empathy as they increase their knowledge of early childhood development and their skill sets, and come to understand the importance of attachment-informed teaching.

Research

Since 2000, Roots of Empathy has been evaluated across three continents in comparative and randomised-controlled studies designed to measure changes in the behaviour. Roots of Empathy’s model of change suggests that increasing empathy is connected to increases in inclusive and collaborative behaviour and increases in positive characteristics (kindness, trustworthiness), which foster and support healthy relationships – all connected to increased wellbeing.

Specifically, these studies have consistently shown that Roots of Empathy children perceive a more positive classroom environment by the end of the programme

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(e.g. increased sense of classroom belonging and peer acceptance). Roots of Empathy children also exhibit:

- ◆ An increase in pro-social behavior (e.g. sharing, helping and including)
- ◆ A decrease in aggression. For example, when applied to all the children that will participate in Roots of Empathy, on average it is expected that the programme will reduce the number of children fighting by approximately 50%. This is particularly significant given that children in the comparison classrooms show increases in aggression across the school year
- ◆ An increase in social and emotional understanding
- ◆ An increase in knowledge of parenting

The Roots of Empathy programme was recently evaluated in Northern Ireland. The findings were completed in 2016 (Connolly et al.) and will be published in 2017. The cluster randomised controlled trial evaluation involved 76 primary schools and tracked nearly 1,200 8-9 year olds. Funded through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Public Health Programme, the trial assessed the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the schools-based social and emotional learning programme.

The Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation’s major longitudinal evaluation of the Roots of Empathy programme found that Roots of Empathy was well received by schools, children and parents, and that it had a measurable and positive impact in increasing children’s prosocial behaviour and reducing the aggressive and difficult behaviour. There was also evidence that the effects in relation to reducing difficult behaviour may have been sustained for three years beyond the end of the programme. The Roots of Empathy programme was also found to be cost effective.

A study commissioned by the Government of Manitoba also showed lasting impact (Santos et al., 2011). It measured prosocial behaviour, physical aggression and indirect aggression. Results showed a significant improvement in all three behaviours in Roots of Empathy children immediately after the programme, with improvements in behaviours maintained three years later, and some behaviours continuing to show improvement.

The decrease in aggression consistently demonstrated by children who have participated in Roots of Empathy programmes is particularly important because aggression, including bullying, is the number one cause of emotional suffering and depression in childhood. Roots of Empathy addresses aggressive behaviour early, at its core, preparing children to take on life’s challenges. Through Roots of Empathy, children learn to:

- ◆ Understand their own feelings
- ◆ Understand the feelings of others which means they are less likely to physically, psychologically or emotionally hurt each other
- ◆ Regulate their emotions, building the inner resilience they will need to cope better with stress throughout life.
- ◆ Establish and maintain relationships and friendships
- ◆ Become productive, happy, healthy global citizens, workers and family members

As well as independent research, Roots of Empathy also conducts annual surveys of each and every programme. At the end of the programme, students, teachers, volunteer families, and instructors complete a survey-based evaluation to identify programme impact in relation to outcomes, using open-ended questions or artwork. Data is collected, analysed and compiled into an Annual Program Evaluation report. The results inform our curriculum updates.

For more information on Roots of Empathy go to www.rootsofempathy.org or contact Cheryl Jackson, Director of Communications and Marketing cjackson@rootsofempathy.org 647-339-0766.

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