

BULLIES & Babies

The Roots of Empathy program brings infants into classrooms to teach social and emotional competence and empathy, and reduce incidents of bullying.

BY MARY GORDON

Empathy *n.* the power of identifying oneself mentally with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation. (Canadian Oxford Dictionary)

Ten-year-old Jessie was lining up with the rest of her classmates to go out for lunch when one boy snatched the hat off the head of another boy. This is the kind of behaviour that is repeated every day, in every school, in every community. As adults, we often ignore it or simply sigh with exasperation, but the truth is that it has the effect of making a child feel helpless and a target for ridicule. Amid a crowd of onlookers, he has to either work up the courage to

retrieve the hat or ignore the taunting boy and carry the humiliation and loss of dignity silently into the playground.

On that day, Jessie stepped out of the line-up and confronted the boy who took the hat. Calmly but firmly she said, “Give him back his hat.” The boy looked at the line-up, weighing the reactions of the others. He saw that the others in the group empathized with his victim; it could just as easily have been them. Grudgingly, he returned the hat. A moral victory had been won. Jessie had acted on her feeling of empathy and the right of that child not to be humiliated. Every child in the class had been sent a message—that these small acts of

cruelty would not be tolerated, that they would find support if they ever became a victim.

Standing up for a classmate, friend or stranger and speaking out against injustice is one of the behaviours that is cultivated in participants of the Roots of Empathy program. It is an evidence-based classroom program that reduces levels of aggression among youth, while raising social and emotional competence and increasing empathy.

Its mission is to build caring, peaceful and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults.

Today’s students are the parents, policy-makers and electorate of the future. Encouraging citizenship in the classroom teaches students civility and builds the foundation for breaking intergenerational cycles of indifference and apathy.

At the heart of the Roots of Empathy

program are visits to a classroom by a neighbourhood infant and parent. These “Family Visits” occur once every three weeks throughout the school year and are facilitated by a certified ROE instructor. The instructor coaches the students to observe the baby’s development, celebrate milestones, interact with the baby and learn about the infant’s needs. The instructor also visits the classroom before and after each Family Visit

to prepare the students and reinforce teachings. A specialized curriculum is used that is developmentally appropriate for each of four age ranges (kindergarten, Grades 1-3, 4-6 and 7-8).

Roots of Empathy was first introduced in a handful of kindergarten classrooms in Toronto in 1996. The program now spans across Canada, with 2,712 programs in nine provinces, involving 67,800 children.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MELANIE GORDON