



ROOTS OF EMPATHY

CHANGING THE WORLD, CHILD BY CHILD

Darren was in Grade 8 and had been held back twice. His mother had been murdered in front of his eyes when he was four years old, and he had lived in a succession of foster homes ever since. Darren looked menacing because he wanted us to know he was tough: his head was shaved except for a pony-tail at the top and he had a tattoo on the back of his head.

The instructor of the Roots of Empathy program was explaining to the class about differences in temperament. She invited the young mother who was visiting the class with Evan, her six-month-old baby, to share her thoughts about her baby's temperament. The mother told the class how Evan liked to face outwards when he was in the Snugli and didn't want to cuddle into her, and how she would have preferred to have a more cuddly baby. As the class ended, the mother asked if anyone wanted to try on the Snugli, which was green and trimmed with pink brocade. To everyone's surprise, Darren offered to try it, and as the other students scrambled to get ready for lunch, he strapped it on. Then he asked if he could put Evan in. The mother was a little apprehensive, but she handed him the baby, and he put Evan in, facing towards his chest. That wise little baby snuggled right in, and Darren took him into a quiet corner and rocked back and forth with the baby in his arms for several minutes. Finally, he came back to where the mother and the Roots of Empathy instructor were waiting and he asked: "If nobody has ever loved you, do you think you could still be a good father?"

How do we prepare children to become parents themselves? How do we teach them to participate in a democracy? How do we help them become advocates of the human rights of others? How can children learn to take the perspective of their classmates? How do we help them resolve conflicts in a way that allows every voice to be heard and taken seriously? How do we create a social and emotional base for academic success? How do we help chil-

dren feel safe and live safely? How do we develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills? How do we defeat bullying and advance respect and inclusion? How do we build an equitable, civil society?

The answer to all these questions – and to Darren's question – lies in fostering empathy in children and adults. The ability to take the perspective of another person (empathy), and to identify commonalities through our shared feelings, is the best peace pill we have. As children grow in empathy, their awareness of and concern for one another tips the ecology of the classroom.

Roots of Empathy (ROE) is a classroom program that has shown dramatic effect in reducing levels of aggression and violence among schoolchildren while raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy.

At the heart of the program are a neighbourhood infant and parent who visit the classroom for nine visits, every three weeks, over the school year. A trained ROE instructor coaches students 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 that the instructor uses to help children identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others. The "emotional literacy" taught in the program lays the foundation for more safe and caring classrooms where children challenge cruelty and are more inclusive.

During a typical Roots of Empathy family visit, the baby, parent and ROE instructor gather on a special green blanket on the classroom floor. Students observe, ask questions, and discuss the infant's behaviour, vocalization, tempera-



EN BREF Au cœur du programme « Racines de l'empathie » se trouvent un nourrisson et un parent qui visitent une classe toutes les trois semaines au cours de l'année scolaire. Les élèves observent le développement du bébé et nomment ses sentiments; le bébé est l'« enseignant », un levier qu'utilise l'éducateur pour aider les enfants à cerner leurs propres émotions, celles des autres, et à y réfléchir. Nous savons intuitivement – et la recherche universitaire le confirme – que l'intelligence émotionnelle est au moins aussi importante que l'intelligence scolaire. Dans le cadre de ce programme, l'attachement et l'harmonisation du parent et de l'enfant constituent un modèle de relations humaines empathiques positives. La recherche démontre que les enfants participants manifestent une diminution de l'agressivité et une augmentation du comportement prosocial.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AND EMPATHY AWAKENS THE SENSE OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CHILDREN FOR THE WELL-BEING OF THEIR PEERS.

ment and overall responses. They are trying to understand the baby's needs and feelings – in other words, to take the perspective of the baby. In the post-family visits that occur in each of the nine themes of the curriculum, the children learn to reflect on their own feelings and take the perspective of their classmates. As their understanding of their own feelings and the feelings of others increases, they are less likely to physically or psychologically hurt each other.

Relationships are at the centre of a civil society, whether that society is a small classroom, the whole school, the community, the country or our ever-shrinking globe. The relationship story is made real for children as they connect with a baby and parent during the first year of the baby's life. The attachment and attunement between the parent and child is a template for positive, empathic human relationships. What the children learn here has universal and far-reaching implications: it shapes how they deal with each other today, and it lays a foundation for their future as parents and citizens.

David was nine years old and had a form of autism. His parents shared the fact that David had never been invited to a birthday party by any of his classmates until the year that Roots of Empathy came into his classroom. During this year he was invited to three birthday parties. Also in this year, David's feelings about himself and school took a 180 degree turn. No medicine ever affected his life as much as the inclusive response of his classmates.

Classroom teachers report that students with autism, like David, benefit from Roots of Empathy as others gain a new understanding of the pain of exclusion.

ROE is typically offered universally, but also may be targeted to high needs neighbourhoods, or to specific populations such as English Language Learners. Many school boards have focused the program in areas where violence was deemed a problem. Others have targeted it to the Grade 4-6 level where aggression and bullying are most prevalent.

Both the globalized world, and a rapid increase in the use of the Internet have had an impact upon the experience of childhood, but children's emotional needs have not changed. As a result of the increased demands upon parents, and the general complexity of life, children have less face-to-face interaction, both with one another and with adults. Their own reports reveal a pandemic of loneliness. Extreme cases of this marginalization and alienation have resulted in tragic events in schools across the world. Columbine in 1999 was the earthquake that shook us out of our complacency in North America and redefined the concept of safe and caring schools forever. In circumstances of such extremity, the natural tendency is to be reactive rather than to look to causal factors and prevention.

The development of social and emotional competence and empathy awakens the sense of moral responsibility in children for the well-being of their peers. When they are coached to understand how others feel and are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and inactions, social responsibility rises and incidents of bullying fall. Bully patrols and surveillance cameras in the schoolyard may become necessary to respond to bullying once it is entrenched, but learning to relate to the feelings of others constitutes bully-proofing from the inside out. As the moti-





EMOTIONAL LITERACY TAUGHT IN THE ROE PROGRAM LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR MORE SAFE AND CARING CLASSROOMS, WHERE STUDENTS ARE THE "CHANGERS". RESEARCH RESULTS FROM NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EVALUATIONS OF ROE INDICATE SIGNIFICANT REDUCTIONS IN AGGRESSION AND AN INCREASE IN PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR.

"Roots of Empathy is solidly based on scientific knowledge of the human condition. But more than that it takes us in to the pedagogy of how one can develop and foster attachment, emotional literacy, authentic communication, and social inclusion. It shows how one can take even the toughest kids and give them an experience which literally changes their lives by helping them get in touch with what it means to be human in a world of diversity – indeed in a very tough world. And of course the close link between academic learning in literacy and math and self-esteem and general well being flourish in a mutually reinforcing dance of development." — Michael Fullan, University of Toronto.

"If the lessons that children learn in Roots of Empathy could have been taught to the people I deal with every day, we'd have far less need for prisons." — Toronto Criminal Court Judge, Justice Ted Ormston.

vation for equity becomes part of our internal moral compass, we become less dependent on authority figures and rules to direct our behavior.

In one grade 4 class, nine-year-old Sylvie was wearing running shoes that did up with a velcro strap. Some of the other children taunted her, saying she wore "baby shoes" and "geeky shoes." This is the kind of humiliation that would shrivel the spirit of any nine-year-old. But then something happened: when the class headed outside for recess, Sylvie's best friend June swapped one shoe with her. The empathic insight and quick thinking of that child gives us hope. Her actions said: I'm your friend and I'm proud to wear your shoes and be just like you. She turned a mean, exclusionary attack into something playful, without saying a word. Every other child in the class got the message: This is my friend, make fun of her and you are making fun of me. Keep it up and you may find yourself outnumbered by kids who care.

We know intuitively, and academic research has shown, that emotional intelligence is at least as important as academic intelligence. Daniel Goleman, an expert in the field of emotional intelligence, states that "To a degree, experience and expertise, like IQ, matter – but there is so much more to the story when it comes to excellence...The most convincing, powerful arguments speak to the heart as well as the head." A major new study by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), to be released in early 2008, confirms this view. It found that students who participated in school-based social and emotional learning programs showed significant improvements in social and emotional skills; attitudes about themselves, others and school; social and classroom behaviour; conduct problems; emotional distress; and achievement test scores and school grades.

Specific research on the effectiveness of ROE also confirms the importance of emotional intelligence, finding a significant decrease in aggression and an increase in pro-social behaviour in children who participated in the program compared to those who did not. Beginning in 2000, researchers at the University of British Columbia (UBC) took a lead role in evaluating the outcomes for children in ROE. Since then, several national and international studies have all shown the same improvements in behaviour. In 2004, the Government of Manitoba commissioned a three-year follow up of a randomized controlled trial (RCT). The study was completed in 2007 and preliminary results show a significant improvement in all behaviours. This positive and encouraging result appears to be sustained three years after children are exposed to the program. Noting the clear link between childhood aggression and adult criminal behaviour, colleagues in the criminal justice field refer to Roots of Empathy as 'crime prevention on a green blanket.'

Roots of Empathy classrooms, now in nine provinces, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, are creating citizens of the world – children who are developing empathic ethics and a sense of social responsibility that takes the position that we all share the same lifeboat. These are the children who will build a more caring, peaceful and civil society, child by child. So far in Canada, the program has reached over 210,000 children.

The concept has now been expanded to include younger children. The government of British Columbia, through the Ministry of Child and Family Development, was the first to request Seeds of Empathy (SOE) to meet the social and emotional needs of 3-5 year-olds in childcare. In addition to having the family visits like Roots of Empathy, Seeds of Empathy trains Early Childhood Educators (ECE) to deliver the literacy curriculum throughout the year. The program is now in 26 childcare centres across B.C. (about 50 percent of which are aboriginal centres), and the government of Alberta is supporting the program in centres where there are high levels of immigrant children. An early literacy program for 3-5 year olds, called Leaves of Literacy, is the latest offshoot of ROE.

Roots of Empathy operationalizes the concept of social inclusion. It is our hope that the Darrens of the world will have faith in their own humanity; that the Sylvies of the world won't have to worry about being mocked; and that the Davids of the world won't be left out of birthday parties because they are different. We believe that it is indeed possible to change the world, child by child. |

For more information about Roots of Empathy, please visit www.rootsofempathy.org

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