



TINY TEACHERS:

Empathy experiences
to break the
cycle of violence

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Calls for innovation in education often focus on the need to prepare students for the future. Ensuring that we are supporting their empathy for others is an often overlooked, but critical, aspect of that preparation.

*a*s a kindergarten teacher and creator of Canada's first Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in schools for families with infants up to age 4, I witnessed alarming rates of domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect. What I learned from the suffering in these families was that an absence of empathy was the common thread in all the violence. And so I created Roots of Empathy in 1996 in an effort to break the pattern of intergenerational violence and poor parenting. Empathy develops through the attachment relationships in the first year of life; therefore, families, two-month-old infants, and their parent(s) are at the heart of the program. The courageous and dedicated families have been my guiding light.

Roots of Empathy is an award-winning international children's charity focused on building caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults. The organization delivers two empathy-based programs: Roots of Empathy for primary school children and Seeds of Empathy for 3- to 5-year-old

Mary Gordon
Roots of Empathy

children in child care centers. Both programs develop empathy and social and emotional competence—fundamental abilities that foster learning and healthy lifelong development. Empathy promotes resilience, well-being, and positive mental health and enables children to forge deeper connections to themselves and others, so they are more inclined to help others and less inclined to hurt them.

Society tends to throw resources at fixing problems rather than preventing them. This means we are more likely to be building prisons than providing children the experiences they need in childhood to prevent them from feeling disconnected and excluded. This exclusion often leads to a slippery slope of dropping out of school and making bad choices, resulting in poor mental health, unemployment, poverty, and crime.

The program pivots around visits throughout the school year of a neighborhood baby and parent. Our “tiny teachers” are between 2 and 4 months old when they begin their visits; as they are generally walking, laughing, and hugging by the end of the school year, the students experience an expansive range of development. Through experiential questioning, our trained instructors guide the children in watching and deciphering how the babies communicate what they need or want to the parents, and how the parents respond. The students learn to articulate and label the emotions of the baby, their own emotions, and recognize those emotions in others. It is deep, experiential learning.

Measuring Our Impact

Roots of Empathy is widely recognized as an effective violence and bullying prevention program. This is because we have research from three continents, including randomized longitudinal studies,

demonstrating that the program significantly reduces violence, aggression, and bullying, while increasing social and emotional competencies such as helping, sharing, caring, including, and empathy.

Early on, we recognized the need for research on our program. We wanted to know if it works, how it works, and which elements work best. We now have almost 20 years of research from independent academics who have done various analyses of our program. The studies have consistently shown that our program reduces aggression and increases prosocial behavior. Longitudinal studies show positive effects after three years. We also have our own research department that does full



Mary Gordon

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annual program evaluations. We survey the children, the host classroom teachers, our instructors, and the volunteer Roots of Empathy family about their experiences with Roots of Empathy. Our findings inform how our program and curriculum evolve. We are one of the few school-based programs with that rigor.

We also measure our success by the growth of our programs. We now have thousands of programs in 14 countries and have reached one million children to date.

A Collaborative Effort

Our program takes many hands to make happen. We are a community program (no matter where we are based) that relies on local families and instructors who volunteer their time and energy. We need solid connections and support from the local schools and school boards. We need various levels of governments to be supportive of building a culture of empathy in their

schools and children. Sometimes, it all falls into place easily; in some places, however, it can take years to build the capacity to start a program.

We have varied sources of funding, from personal donors to corporations, foundations, and governments. We have sustained those relationships over time. We started out by partnering (especially overseas) with agencies that could help us find connections in local communities and we have evolved into nonprofit status in seven countries.

Our guiding principal in working with partners and accepting funding has been that we must have a shared purpose. Without that shared purpose, there is a fairly good chance that things will go off the rails. For example, a donor may be excited about a program and want to introduce it in a targeted way to children who have been identified as being aggressive and difficult to deal with in a normal classroom setting. We would not accept this money because we work in the

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classroom at a universal level, without targeting children with any exceptionalities. Part of the success of the program is working in the community of the classroom.

Scaling and Expanding the Program

Scaling the program has not been without its challenges.

Public policy often has a powerful influence. In deciding which invitations to accept, one of the key factors we consider is what that country's policy on parental leave is. Scandinavia and Canada, for example, have generous policies allowing one or both parents to spend the first year of the baby's life at home while their jobs are protected.

This policy is supportive of developing a secure attachment relationship and does more for optimal brain development than any later interventions could. The attachment relationship is the vehicle for learning; when it goes well, children thrive, learning to love well and relate well.

Many educators experience their most serious challenges with student behavior in high school. We are routinely asked to bring the program to high school, but we routinely decline these offers. We don't lack confidence in students at this age, but the structure of high school is not ideal for the optimal impact of the program. Students do not spend significant amounts of time with one teacher and the same group of students. So we prefer to work in a more preventive mode, before students are shuffled into middle school or high school. In K-8 schools, the program thrives with the 13-year-olds.

As a social entrepreneur, I have been fortunate to speak to government officials in many countries and have frequently been invited to bring our program to their criminal justice system. Unfortunately, it is not possible to recreate in the prison system the conditions in the classroom that allow for the evidence-based change in attitudes and behavior.

One area of expansion that has been possible is bringing a version of Roots of Empathy to preschool-age children. In this program, called Seeds of Empathy, we train the whole child care center and give specialized training to develop literacy coaches and

family guides. The Seeds of Empathy program operates on the same principle as Roots of Empathy, but is designed for the developmental needs of 3- to 5-year-old children. The beauty of this program is that it celebrates the power of the relationship between the educator and the children. The training provides a huge boost to the early childhood educators while supplying the curriculum and materials to deliver the program. Indigenous communities have been particularly interested in implementing this program.

Innovating the Dream for the Future

I'm frequently asked to share what advice I might have for social entrepreneurs as they scale their own innovations. My first point is: Don't be alone. Make friends and hold hands. No idea can flourish with a team of one. Also, even if a new idea is difficult to explain and even harder to fund, hold tight to your dream.

In 2018, I won the Governor General of Canada's Innovation Award for Roots of Empathy. I was honored and surprised because the other winners were technology ideas, medical breakthroughs, and business ideas. We were the only social innovation. However, it made sense. Empathy must be at the heart of innovation. To be able to see another person's perspective, their challenge, that "thing" you want to fix for them, means you feel with them—and that is empathy.

As we approach the next decade, with rapidly increasing change and automation and technology likely to reshape how we live, we need empathy more than ever to address the current "crisis of connection" in society.

The Research:

Santos, R. G., Chartier, M. J., Whalen, J. C., Chateau, D., & Boyd, L. (2011). Effectiveness of school-based violence prevention for children and youth: Cluster randomized controlled field trial of the Roots of Empathy program with replication and three-year follow-up. *Healthcare Quarterly*, 14, 80-90.

Latsch, D., Stauffer, M., & Bollinger, M. (2017). *Evaluation of the Roots of Empathy program in Switzerland, years 2015 to 2017*. Full Report. Bern, Switzerland: Bern University of Applied Science.

Wrigley, J., Makara K., & Elliot D. (2015). *Evaluation of Roots of Empathy in Scotland 2014-2015, Final report for Action for Children* (unpublished).

For Further Reading

Educating Empathy: Inspiring students to develop their passions

By Jessica Spencer-Keyse

In this article featured on the Brookings Institution's Education Innovations blog, Jessica Spencer-Keyse, Head of Global Research at HundrED, talks about the importance of social and behavioral skills for children's ultimate health and well-being. She notes that "The ability to empathize, for example, allows us to have healthy interpersonal relationships, promote social understanding, and engage in altruistic acts." As teaching empathy is not always a priority for schools, however, innovation is needed to support this crucial aspect of learning.

As an example, she describes the Venezuelan program Trix and Trax, which is a peer-to-peer learning system that leverages live events and social media to inspire young people to gain valuable skills while developing their passions.

Read the article at:
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2018/03/06/educating-empathy-inspiring-students-to-develop-their-passions/>



Read more about Trix and Trax at:
<https://hundred.org/en/innovations/trix-and-trax>

