

TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO CARE


Introduction

Focus

In this *News in Review* story, we will explore an important school program that teaches empathy to children from Kindergarten to Grade 8. It is called Roots of Empathy, and the core component of the program is a visit from an infant and parent every three weeks for the duration of the school year.

Quote

“Love grows brains.”
— Mary Gordon,
founder, Roots of
Empathy program

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

Sometimes it seems like the world is a scary place. We see violence on television, we hear about crime in our neighbourhoods, and we witness aggressive and violent acts—often in the form of bullying—within our schools. One thing we know from research into aggression and violence is that in order to hurt or be mean to another person we have to see that person as “the other.” When we begin to see another person as different than, rather than similar to, ourselves it becomes much easier to harm or victimize that person.

It makes sense, then, that to reduce incidents of aggression and violence in society we have to increase empathy in humans. Empathy is the ability to identify with another person’s feelings. The ability to see and feel things as others see and feel them is a skill that results in improved social relationships—and the better our social relationships, the less conflict between people.

Reducing conflict in our schools is especially important. Bullying is a reality for many children in school.

Those who are bullied suffer from anxiety and sleep disorders, and often receive serious physical injuries. The pain and humiliation of being bullied in front of others leaves permanent scars, and in the most extreme cases, victims take their own lives to escape from the pain. Those who witness bullying in schools are often torn by conflicting emotions and feel guilty about not getting involved to stop the harassment. So any steps that we can take to reduce conflict and increase pro-social (socially positive) behaviour among children is worthwhile.

In the Roots of Empathy program, the regular visit of a baby to the school is a central part of the experience. As students bond with the baby they learn to see the world through the eyes of someone else. This increases their level of empathy in their everyday life. It makes them much more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours, like intervening in situations where others are being bullied. It seems to make the world a less scary place for many young people.

To Consider

1. Describe any bullying incidents you have experienced or that you have witnessed at school.
2. Explain how you felt during these incidents.
3. How were the situations resolved? Or were they not?
4. Does your school have an anti-bullying policy or program? If so, describe the elements of the policy/program.
5. Describe what you might be able to do to take action against bullying. What adults might you be able to involve in the problem? How might you be able to reach out to a victim of bullying?

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Video Review

As you view the video, respond to the questions.

Further Research

Kids Help Phone and Parent Help Line is a 24-hour-a-day, bilingual counselling service. Professional counsellors respond to toll-free phone calls at 1-800-668-6868.

1. What can babies teach kids in school?

2. According to Mary Gordon, what is the link between empathy and aggression?

3. How does the Roots of Empathy program work?

4. Make a list of the things students learn about babies and child development.

5. How have interactions with the baby had an impact on the students' relationships with one another?

6. How does the program make a link between the study of babies and taking a stand against bullying at school?

7. According to a University of British Columbia study, how effective is the Roots of Empathy program at reducing aggressive acts at school?

8. At the conclusion of the program, what were some of the wishes the students had for baby Eleanor?

For Discussion

1. Why might it be important that both boys and girls participate in this program?

2. Do you think the Roots of Empathy program would be effective at your school? Why or why not?

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What Research Says

Quote

“Once children are of school age, the single most important thing that we can do to advance pro-social (non-violent) behaviour and effective parenting for the next generation is to foster the development of empathy.” — Mary Gordon, founder, Roots of Empathy

Further Research

To learn more about the program, visit the Roots of Empathy Web site at www.rootsofempathy.org.

The Roots of Anti-social Behaviour

Anti-social behaviour can be defined as any behaviour that differs from established social norms. This definition will vary to some degree based on the social environment in which a child lives.

Examples of anti-social behaviour include:

- skipping school
- getting into fights
- running away from home
- persistently lying
- using illegal drugs or alcohol
- stealing, vandalizing property
- engaging in aggressive or violent behavior toward other individuals (including bullying)
- violating school rules, home rules, or local criminal laws

There are several factors that can lead a young person to engage in anti-social behaviours. These generally fall into three separate areas: family, individual, and school.

Family Factors

Studies have shown that most bullies come from homes where the child receives very little attention and warmth. The child also often sees aggressive behaviour being used at home. Children who are victims of violence, or who witness violence being used against other family members, tend to grow up believing that “might makes right.” Psychologists believe that children model this behaviour in their own relationships with peers and other adults. As well, children from violent households do not learn non-violent conflict resolution strategies. Children learn what they live, and if they never

see conflicts being resolved in a positive manner, they will not be able to resolve conflicts successfully themselves.

Sociologists also point to the breakdown of the nuclear family as another factor that has resulted in an increase in anti-social behaviour. Since the 1960s, the rate of divorce has soared. As a result, fewer people live in nuclear families—one where a man and woman marry and have children and live together as a single family. Sociologists argue that many single parents are so overburdened with their responsibilities for working and taking care of household duties that they simply can’t spend a sufficient amount of time with their children. This may result in children being poorly supervised or feeling neglected or ignored. (Of course, this can also happen in two-parent families as well.)

Sociologist Freda Adler studied several countries with low rates of violence to determine why they experienced less crime than North American countries. She found that all countries with low rates of violence had strong family systems. Businesses in these countries promoted the family structure by providing good child care, leisure activities, and good vacation plans to help support workers with families. This support of families resulted in happier, more stable individuals and reduced incidence of crime.

Individual Factors

Studies show that children who bully tend to have an active and impulsive temperament. Frequently they are physically larger and stronger than their

classmates (this is more true of boys who bully than of girls) but it should be noted that not all physically strong and active students are bullies—in fact the majority are not.

Psychologists like Harry Harlow strongly believe that the attachment between a child and his or her primary caregiver is the most important relationship of a person's life. Harlow believed that the quality of this relationship determined an individual's ability to form other lasting relationships in life. In studies conducted in the 1950s, Harlow found that a connection with a warm, loving caregiver is so important that baby rhesus monkeys would only leave such a caregiver for up to one hour a day and only when they absolutely had to eat. For the remaining 23 hours of the day, the monkeys would stay with the caregiver that provided warmth and security.

Analysis

Review the family, individual, and school factors linked to anti-social behaviour. Identify and record the three specific elements that you believe play the biggest role in creating bullies.

School Factors

Teachers and school administrators have learned they can reduce incidents of violence and bullying in and around the school through increased supervision on the playground and in the hallways and cafeteria. Immediate adult intervention whenever a bullying incident is witnessed is also important. Both of these elements send the message that bullying behaviour will not be tolerated. It also sends an important message to the victim that he or she has support within the school.

But school administrators also acknowledge that these steps alone cannot solve the problem of bullying. They believe that programs designed to encourage pro-social behaviour and increase empathy are an important component of achieving more supportive school environments—in other words, programs like Roots of Empathy.

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The Roots of Empathy Program

What is the program?

The Roots of Empathy program is built around nine “family visits” where a neighbourhood infant and parent visit a local classroom. There are pre-visit lessons the week before the family visit and post-visit lessons the week after the baby and parent come to the school. In total, the program runs for 27 weeks, with a 30-minute lesson each week. A trained Roots of Empathy instructor facilitates the lessons with the regular classroom teacher.

What does the program teach?

Emotional Literacy

The program helps students learn to identify, label, and talk about their feelings. This occurs through contact with the infant and parent who visit the classroom, and through other classroom activities. For example, children read stories that talk about fears.

Perspective Taking

Students learn how to see the world through the perspective of another person. For example, they may be asked to report on what the baby sees while lying on her tummy as compared with lying on her back. They are encouraged to apply their learning about perspective to their own lives.

Neuroscience

Students in the program learn how a baby’s brain develops over a nine-month period. Through their observation and work with the baby, students realize that babies learn through loving relationships and that there is no unimportant moment in a child’s life.

Prevention of Teen Pregnancy

Older students learn how demanding it is to care for a baby. They have the opportunity to realize how vulnerable an infant is, and how an infant is completely dependent on the parent. One teaching strategy used is to have students track their own sleeping patterns for a week and then compare them with the parent’s sleeping pattern.

Temperament

Students learn that each baby is unique and that every baby responds to stimulation and new situations differently. Through their participation in the program they realize that some babies have very sensitive temperaments and that this is neither good nor bad. Students are encouraged to reflect on their own temperament and how it may shape their reactions to particular situations.

Attachment

Students in the program also have the opportunity to observe the growth of the bond between the infant and parent over the course of the school year. Students learn that the baby relies on the parent to feel safe and to understand the world. Students also learn that it is always possible to learn the skills to become a good parent.

Male Nurturance

In 30 per cent of the Roots of Empathy classes, fathers participate with their infants. Fathers share their perspective on parenting and, through their interactions with their infants, demonstrate what it means to be a loving father. Boys in our society usually have less opportunity to talk about their feelings,

Quote

"I would endorse Roots of Empathy, if judges could do such a thing. . . . This is exactly the type of thing we should be doing. The wrong answer is to build more prisons." — Judge Edward Ormston, Interior Court of Justice, Toronto (PBS, *Global Tribe* series at www.pbs.org/kcet/globaltribe/voices/voi_gordon.html)

Did you know . . .

In the 2005-06 school year, there were 1 581 programs operating in nine provinces, reaching 39 525 children across Canada.

so this male perspective on parenting and nurturing is very important.

Infant Development

Students learn about infant development by measuring, graphing, and recording the baby's size a minimum of three times throughout the program. They also celebrate with the baby and parent when the baby achieves milestones like learning to roll over.

Infant Safety

The program has a strong focus on child abuse prevention. Children learn about risks to babies such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, Shaken Baby Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and the dangers of second-hand smoke. The developers of the program believe that as students cultivate empathy and learn better emotional literacy domestic violence in their adult lives will be reduced.

Violence Prevention

When children are able to understand another's point of view and respect their feelings, aggressive behaviour is less likely to occur. Students who have participated in the Roots of Empathy program demonstrate an increase in pro-social behaviour and a decrease in aggression related to bullying.

Inclusion

Throughout the program children practise skills of social inclusion and learn to value different opinions and different pathways to competent parenting. Parents and infants who participate in the program reflect the many races, cultures, languages, and religions of communities across Canada.

Who can participate in the program?

The program runs for children from Kindergarten to Grade 8. There are different lesson plans for different age groups.

Who developed the program?

Mary Gordon founded the program in 1996. Recognized nationally and internationally as an educator, child advocate, and parenting expert, Gordon speaks to and consults with governments, education organizations, and public institutions. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards recognizing her contribution to education, including the Order of Canada.

In 2006, Gordon met with the Dalai Lama. After the meetings, it was determined that Roots of Empathy will become part of the Dalai Lama's Peace and Education Centre, to be based in Vancouver. Earlier in 2006, she collaborated with the World Bank Institute in Paris and the World Health Organization. She also travelled to South Africa to share her parenting expertise with The Nelson Mandela Children's Foundation.

Gordon has been described as having high standards of innovation, entrepreneurial skill, creativity, social impact, and human ethics. Her work as a dedicated educator has won her many awards. These include:

- The first female Canadian Ashoka Fellow, recognizing her as an international social entrepreneur
- The first Fraser Mustard Award, recognizing her contribution to the physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of Canada's next generation of leaders

- Commemorative Medal for the Golden Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II by the Ontario Teachers' Federation for her service to students, teachers, and the profession in Ontario
- Distinguished Educator Award (national), from the University of Toronto
- Ontario Teachers' Federation Fellowship Lifetime Award
- Woman of the Village, Every Child is Sacred
- Member of the Order of Canada

Application and Analysis

1. In your notebook record the name of the different elements of the Roots of Empathy program. In one sentence, describe each element. Review your notes and think about any areas of your education that may have taught you similar information. Record any examples that come to mind. Do your notes demonstrate a need for a program such as Roots of Empathy or not? Explain your conclusion.
2. Review the information about the Roots of Empathy founder, Mary Gordon. Consider writing a letter or an e-mail to her sharing your feelings about her contributions to the lives of young Canadians across the country.

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Bullying

Did you know . . .

Cyber-bullying is one of the latest forms of bullying. Bullies send their victims abusive e-mails and text messages, spread mean rumours in Internet chat rooms, and often make harassing cellphone calls. When cyber-bullying occurs it can often be difficult to identify who is doing it and therefore very difficult to stop.

What is it?

You probably are familiar with bullying. Bullying is a repeated, persistent form of harassment that can include physical violence, verbal abuse, or “indirect” humiliation. This last category includes things like spreading vicious rumours or gossip about someone. You may have been a victim of bullying yourself, you may have bullied someone else, or you may have witnessed bullying in your school.

If you’ve never been a victim of bullying, you might not fully understand how hurtful it is to be bullied. You may think bullying is mostly harmless. But it is not. Students who are bullied suffer from some or all of the following problems:

- nightmares and sleep disorders
- stomach aches and ulcers
- high levels of fear and anxiety
- physical injuries
- loneliness and depression
- suicidal thoughts

Why does it occur?

Bullying occurs because bullies themselves are usually lonely and have few friends. They have trouble in relationships and lash out at others to get attention. They may be angry at someone else in their lives who has hurt them, and they redirect that anger at someone more vulnerable than they are.

But studies have also shown that bullies can also be hurt if their behaviour is not corrected. Bullies who go unpunished for their actions often grow up to become aggressive adults. Studies show that adults who were bullies as children have a much higher than average chance of being convicted of multiple criminal charges.

Bullying also occurs because most kids who witness bullying do not intervene to stop it. And there are a number of reasons why kids do not intervene. One study conducted by the University of British Columbia found that:

- 64 per cent of kids consider bullying a normal part of school life
- 61-80 per cent of kids believe bullies are popular and enjoy high status among their peers
- 25-33 per cent of kids believe bullying is sometimes okay and/or that it is okay to pick on “losers”
- 20-50 per cent of kids think that bullying can be a good thing (makes people tougher, is a good way to solve problems, etc.).

Source: “Sticks, stones and bullies.” CBC News Online. March 23, 2005, www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/

But onlookers are also hurt by bullying behaviour. Although they may not initiate bullying behaviour, they often will follow the lead of the bully out of fear. When they see that there are no negative consequences to bullying, chances are they will become more aggressive in the future.

What if bullying is unchecked?

In the most extreme cases, bullies end up killing their victims, the victims commit suicide, or the victims resort to violence to try to make the bully pay for the abuse. Canada has unfortunately seen a number of young lives cut short as a result of bullying.

- In 2005, 16-year-old Gary Hansen, hanged himself in Roblin, Manitoba, after persistent bullying at the local high school. Gary had been taken out of school and home-schooled for two

years because of earlier bullying. But in 2005, he had returned to school and his marks were increasing when the bullying began again. He was taunted, beaten up, and accused of being gay.

- In 2004, 16-year-old Travis Sleeve shot himself after being beaten up and having his car defaced. His mother says that the school board had not responded to her complaints when the bullying was occurring.
- In 2004, a 14-year-old girl named Dawn-Marie Wesley hanged herself in her bedroom after constant bullying by three girls at school. Her suicide note said that “If I try to get help it will get worse. . . . If I ratted they would get suspended and there would be no stopping them.”
- In 2000, bullying drove 14-year-old Hamed Nastoh to kill himself by jumping off a bridge. He left a seven-page suicide note for his family.
- In 1998, 10-year-old Myles Neuts was found hanging, unconscious, from a coat hook at an elementary school in Ontario. He died four days later. A coroner’s inquest later revealed that Myles was hung on the hook by two older boys who had waited for him in a washroom, suspended him from the coat hook as he slowly strangled, and brought friends in to watch “the dummy” until one told a teacher.
- In 1997, 14-year-old Reena Virk was attacked and beaten by six teenaged girls and a teenaged boy. These schoolmates of Virk’s beat her unconscious and left her to drown.

After Reena Virk’s death, Yasmin Jiwani, executive co-ordinator of Vancouver’s FREDA Centre for Re-

search on Violence against Women and Children (www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/index.htm), wrote an essay on the tragedy. She argued that Virk desperately tried to fit in but she failed. “She was brown in a predominately white society. She was supposedly overweight in a society which values slimness to the point of anorexia, and she was different in a society which values ‘sameness’ and uniformity.”

Source: “Sticks, stones and bullies.” CBC News Online. March 23, 2005, www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/

Who are the targets?

Many experts point to a typical profile of bullying victims.

- They are quiet and shy and when they are bullied they do not fight back.
- They tend not to be confident in their physical abilities or strength.
- They may not have a lot of friends.
- They are afraid of reporting bullying because they fear retaliation or are ashamed they can’t protect themselves.
- They believe that adults will not be able to protect them from the bullying.
- They feel powerless.

But experts are also quick to note there is no typical victim. They believe this is because there is no real reason for someone to be targeted. If one child decides that another one is wearing “stupid shoes” or is a “loser” sometimes the labels stick. So, anyone can become a victim. These experts believe that this is an important message to send to children. All of us have flaws. All of us have characteristics that might seem odd or quirky at times. But we are all human and deserve to be treated fairly.

Activity

Produce a pamphlet or poster describing the problem of bullying. Design your product for kids your age or younger. See if you can arrange to display your products in your school foyer or deliver them to an elementary school near you.

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Activity: Anti-Bullying Initiatives

A Case Study from Waterloo Region

Queen Elizabeth Public School in the Waterloo Region District School Board has developed an anti-bullying program entitled “Imagine a School Without Bullying.” The program is based on the acronym ROAR. The acronym represents the key components of the program: Respect, Others, Attitude, and Responsibility. The entire teaching staff is involved in an initiative that rewards students who show a sense of leadership and demonstrate kindness toward others.

According to the administrators at Queen Elizabeth, since the ROAR program was initiated, the number of detentions assigned has dropped significantly, students are learning the skills needed to resolve disputes through discussion, and new friendships are being developed.

Your Task

Elementary Students

1. In small groups, review the anti-bullying policy for your school.
2. Discuss and record the features that your group believes are positive aspects of the program.
3. Reflect on what is missing from the program and/or what aspects need to be added to make the program more effective.
4. Also consider how well known the policy is within your school and how well it is promoted. What does this say about the credibility or importance given to the program?

Secondary School Students

Bullying is not just a problem that occurs in elementary schools. In fact, a number of recent studies have indicated that bullying directed at high-school students is on the increase. Read the following article on this topic and then brainstorm a list of possible steps that could be taken at the secondary school level to reduce bullying of the type discussed in the story.

More Winnipeg teens subject to bullying, survey says

More Winnipeg teenagers are being bullied—not so much with fists and punches, but with harsh words and cellphones—according to the results of a Teen Touch survey released Thursday morning.

The survey of 1 177 teenagers aged 11 to 14 by the Manitoba-based youth helpline found that while more teens are aware of how to deal with bullying, more of them are also being targeted by bullies: 49 per cent of respondents said they had been bullied in the last year.

“Last year it was [a] roughly 15 per cent occurrence rate, and this year is almost [a] 20 per cent occurrence rate,” Teen Touch spokesperson Lee-Ann Provovski said Wednesday. “So we are seeing an increase in the amount of respondents that said that they were currently being bullied.”

About 13 per cent of respondents said they are currently bullying someone. More than 73 per cent said they had witnessed someone being bullied, usually at school, in the past year. However, only 38 per cent said they told someone about it. Verbal bullying was the most common form of bullying witnesses saw, followed by physical violence and property-based bullying.

But Provenski said more young people use cellphones and computers to bully. "Bullying has really become more Internet-based, text messages via your cellphone, more verbal bullying, and more social bullying," she said. "It seems that bullying is really taking on different phases and different genres."

Provenski said the good news is an overwhelming majority of teens say they now know how to deal with bullies, thanks to new school-based programs that address the issue.

As well, more than 68 per cent of bullying victims said they were able to talk to someone about it. The majority of respondents said the best way to deal with bullying was to talk to a teacher or parent about it, while they identified physically fighting back as the worst way.

Teen Touch is a province-wide non-profit help line for Manitoba children and teenagers. Each year, volunteer counsellors receive more than 25 000 calls from children and teenagers who need advice or assistance.

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Source: Yahoo News Canada at <http://ca.news.yahoo.com/s/23112006/3/canada-winnipeg-teens-subject-bullying-survey-says.html&printer=1>