



Roots of Empathy Key Information

What is Roots of Empathy?

Roots of Empathy is an award-winning charitable organization that offers empathy-based programming for children. Our vision is to change the world – child by child.

Roots of Empathy is considered a model of social innovation and has two programs: a flagship program of the same name for children in elementary school - Roots of Empathy, and Seeds of Empathy - a program for children ages three to five in childcare settings. Both programs have shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among children, including bullying, while raising their social and emotional competence and increasing empathy.

Mission

Roots of Empathy's mission is to build caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults.

History and Reach

In 1996, Mary Gordon created the Roots of Empathy program in Toronto, Canada. Roots of Empathy became a charitable not-for-profit organization in 2000. To date, Roots of Empathy programs have reached nearly one million children worldwide.

Roots of Empathy programs are delivered to schoolchildren from Kindergarten to Grade 8 across Canada, in English and French, and in rural, urban and remote communities. They also reach children in the United States, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands and Costa Rica. The program has been called "Canada's olive branch to the world."

In 2008, the Assembly of First Nations passed a resolution to endorse Roots of Empathy and Seeds of Empathy, calling both programs "compatible with traditional First Nations teachings and worldviews." Both programs are offered in a growing number of First Nations communities and to urban and rural Indigenous children across Canada, and the organization works in partnership with Indigenous people globally.

Roots of Empathy and Founder and President Mary Gordon have won numerous international awards for innovation and best practice in education.

Roots of Empathy in Action

In the Roots of Empathy program, a parent and baby (who is two to four months old at the start of the program) from the community visit a classroom nine times over the course of a school year. A trained Roots of Empathy instructor visits with the family to guide children as they observe the relationship between the baby and its parent. The instructor also visits before and after each family visit to reinforce teachings. There are 27 classroom visits in total in a Roots of Empathy program.





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In the program, the baby is the “Teacher.” With each family visit, the instructor leads the children in noticing how the baby is growing and changing over the course of his or her first year of life. The children also watch the loving relationship between the parent and baby and see how the parent responds to the baby’s emotions and meets the baby’s needs. The attachment relationship between a baby and a parent is an ideal model of empathy.

Children learn to understand the perspective of the baby and label the baby’s feelings, and then are guided in extending this learning outwards so they have a better understanding of their own feelings and the feelings of others. This emotional literacy lays the foundation for more safe and caring classrooms, where children are “Changers.” They are more socially and emotionally competent and much more likely to challenge cruelty and injustice.

Research on Roots of Empathy

Eighteen years of independent academic research across three continents has consistently shown that the program dramatically reduces aggression and increases social and emotional understanding among children who receive it. Children who have participated in Roots of Empathy programs are kinder, more cooperative and more inclusive of others, and are less aggressive and less likely to bully others compared to children who do not participate in the program. These positive effects have been shown to last years.

About Mary Gordon

Internationally recognized social entrepreneur, educator, author and child advocate Mary Gordon has created innovative programs informed by the power of empathy: she founded Roots of Empathy in 1996 and created Seeds of Empathy in 2005. In 1981 she initiated Canada’s first school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, which today serve as a best-practice model and are public policy in Ontario.

Mary Gordon speaks internationally and consults to organizations such as The World Health Organization, the United Nations and the Nelson Mandela Foundation. She has had several dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She is a member of the Order of Canada, the Order of Newfoundland and Labrador, and was a recipient of both the Queen’s Silver and Diamond Jubilee Awards. Ms. Gordon was elected an Ashoka Fellow in 2002 and an Ashoka Globalizer in 2011, the same year she was named Canada’s Top Social Innovator, honoured with the national Manning Innovation Award’s David E. Mitchell Award of Distinction. In 2018 Ms. Gordon received the Governor General’s Innovation Award.

For more information, visit www.rootsofempathy.org

