

# Roots of Empathy



LETTER 6

## MENTORING MESSAGES FROM MARY

Dear Roots of Empathy Instructors,

We live in an increasingly stressful, fragmented world where children experience insecurities about global problems like war and climate change and social problems such as families breaking up. More and more children are lonely and the lonely brain isn't a learning brain. My message in this letter is one of hope, as Roots of Empathy provides children with the opportunity to develop emotional regulation, which contributes to their resiliency. A generation of resilient and empathic children will indeed change the world child by child.

### Questions You Might Ask Your Mentor



One of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of being a Roots of Empathy Instructor is playing the conductor role in a symphony of relationships. Working with the orchestra members—the Roots of Empathy Family, the Mentor, the Classroom Teacher, the Principal, and the Local Coordinator (Key Point Person)—requires a lot of coordination and many questions may arise, such as:

- My Classroom Teacher would like to take a personal video of the Roots of Empathy Family Visit. What do I do?
- Sometimes, it seems like it takes the children in my Roots of Empathy class a long time to settle into Roots of Empathy lessons. What can I do?

If you don't know the answer to these questions or if you have other questions please contact your Roots of Empathy Mentor for support and guidance.

### From the Green Blanket



#### Emotional Regulation

In the Roots of Empathy program, we discuss emotions—the baby's, the parents', and the children's—and help children to develop emotional literacy and learn to regulate their emotions. *Emotional regulation* is a term that is increasingly used in educational and mental health discussions. It is also referred to as *self regulation*.

The transformative power of the Roots of Empathy program rests in the attachment and attunement relationship between the infant and parent. We leverage this relationship to help children see how empathy works. Children develop their own empathy as they learn to take the perspective of the baby and learn about the baby's feelings.

We can help the children to observe their own immediate experiences and feelings by helping them to observe the baby's intentions and emotions and the attunement between the baby and

parent. Family visits also empower the children to, in the future, reflect on their own experiences and feelings.

When the Roots of Empathy parent down-regulates the baby's crying or agitation, the children feel with the baby (empathy) and are coached to put into words how the parent makes the baby feel better and how the baby responds to the soothing. Teachable moments arise when a baby becomes upset. The Instructor can use questions to guide the children in observing and commenting on the parent's efforts to comfort or down-regulate the baby. The Instructor has an opportunity to ask the children to share what they see the parent doing through the various senses. For example, "What is the mother doing with her voice? What is the father doing with his hands?"



Baby Carter's mother is helping to comfort Carter by holding and rocking him.

Children come to understand that when the baby is held, kissed, spoken to softly and reassured by the familiar scent and feel of the parent that these sensory experiences are helping the multiple firing and wiring of neurons in the baby's brain. The children witness the baby's change in state and see how the parent is able to soothe the baby back to being calm. When babies are stressed, levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, are increased in their brains. Cortisol levels are decreased by comforting by the parent. Cortisol levels are also reduced, as research has discovered, when individuals speak about their feelings (Matt Lieberman et al., 2007).

Roots of Empathy helps children identify with stress or upset feelings. As the Instructor, you can bridge experiential learning to reflective capacity. For example you might ask, "What are the signs that your body gives you to let you know you feel upset? When was a time you felt upset? How did you calm yourself down?" Children may offer a wide range of age-relevant solutions including cuddling up with a teddy bear, listening to music, and talking to a friend, teacher or family member about how they feel. We will know we have served children well when their teachers evaluate the program by saying that children speak often about how they feel.

The learning that happens around the Green Blanket through the attunement of the parent and baby helps children develop self regulation. Self regulation is integral to student learning and fundamental to academic and life success. When children develop self regulation they are developing inner resilience. This inner resilience will help them cope with stress throughout life and allow them to connect with others, helping them become productive, happy, healthy global citizens, workers, and family members.



Roots of Empathy  
Racines de l'empathie

**Empathy** is the ability to understand how another person feels.

## Empathy Action


### Artwork is the Poetry of the Soul

From time immemorial humankind has expressed emotion in art form. Children in Roots of Empathy are invited to draw what they feel. Children's art is not necessarily representational of what they see, but of what they feel. Children don't engage in still life drawing but rather in the landscape of their emotions. Their art is deeply personal and holds lessons for all of us as it reveals their truths. This is why in Roots of Empathy we never praise children's artistic efforts or their spoken efforts. We acknowledge their contributions and allow them to have ownership over their efforts and the palate of their emotions. You might say, for example, "Would you like to tell me about your picture?" And then afterwards you could respond with a simple, "Thank for sharing your picture with me."

Young children often cannot access the words to explain how they're feeling, but through drawing, they are emotionally fluent. Just as the Roots of Empathy babies may have limited or no expressive vocabulary, they may have rich receptive vocabulary.

In Roots of Empathy, we see every child as an artist. Picasso claimed he worked all his life to paint like a child. We need to respect our Roots of Empathy artists by providing them with materials that are fresh and paper that is the appropriate size for their age.

With respect,



Mary Gordon  
Founder/President, Roots of Empathy



The classroom is a microcosm of society. Roots of Empathy uses art as a vehicle to draw out the poetry in children. This student remembers in horrifying detail a scene that is embedded in his emotional memory. Through art he was able to surface that emotional turmoil, where words couldn't touch the depth of this pain. For children, drawing is a reflective and healing medium. Teachers seldom know the personal horrors that children harbor as they sit at their desks in the classroom. Many children weather private wars of abuse and neglect in their lives. Art in Roots of Empathy classes creates a bridge from student to student and from student to teacher, enabling them to empathize and open a dialogue.

