

Roots of Empathy

MENTORING MESSAGES FROM MARY



LETTER 7

Dear Roots of Empathy Instructors,

The discussion of executive functioning skills in this message will give you a backdrop to appreciate the long-term impact of both the experiential work you do around the Green Blanket and the activities you do with the students throughout the themes that support the development of executive functioning skills.

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:

- I have been looking ahead to Theme 9 of the Roots of Empathy curriculum and I'm wondering where I find the latest version of the Feedback Forms and End-of-Year Certificates. What do I do?
- Why is it important to debrief with the Roots of Empathy parent directly after each Family Visit when they are always in a rush to leave?

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



Roots of Empathy Enhances Executive Functioning Skills

The term *executive function* refers to cognitive (thinking) abilities that influence other capabilities and behaviour. We will focus on three areas of executive functioning skills.

1. *Focusing Attention* refers to the capacity of a child to pay attention and filter out distractions. Being able to focus attention is vital for learning. From the first breath and throughout life, emotion drives attention. It is generally understood that attention drives learning but not always appreciated that emotion drives and deepens learning. The Roots of Empathy teaching methodology of asking questions results in focusing the children's attention and engaging them in the learning from the Green Blanket. For example, in Roots of Empathy we ask the children to focus on the perspective of the baby. When Roots of Empathy Instructors ask the children how the baby is feeling and what the baby is thinking, they are focusing the children's attention and bringing together both the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy.

2. *Impulse Control* is the ability to resist temptation; this is associated with students' ability to succeed academically.¹ This skill is related to the child's ability to sustain attention, to think before acting and to prioritize. Through the Roots of Empathy curriculum, students are given experiential opportunities to reflect on the temperament traits of the baby, such as, impulsivity versus cautiousness, frustration and intensity levels. These traits either support or challenge impulse control. Having students reflect on their own temperament helps them to understand themselves and helps them to understand others. Insight into their unique temperament traits gives the children a chance to be mindful of how their behaviours can influence their relationships with others and how they can help or hurt other people.
3. *Working Memory* is the ability to hold and use ideas and information over short periods of time while dealing with new information. In Roots of Empathy classes, children are asked to remember things that the Roots of Empathy baby did in the past, and discuss the baby's development as it relates to both past and current observations. Each Family Visit also starts with the children sharing the differences that they noticed in the baby since the last visit. These differences cover all domains of development.



In this picture you can see how the Roots of Empathy Instructor has engaged the Grade 5 students in observing the baby's new developmental milestone of rolling over. The students are encouraged to ask the mother questions about how it feels to see baby Jayden roll over for the first time.

Students practice the executive functioning skill of working memory when they think about baby Jayden's previous development in comparison with her new developmental milestone of rolling over and imagine all the scenarios that might pose a safety risk. The students question the mother on how she feels about the new risks to her baby's safety and what she will do to safety-proof the house.

Empathy is the ability to understand how another person feels.

Empathy Action

Decision-Making

Another executive functioning skill is being able to make decisions, organize and plan. The theme Caring and Planning for Baby is an example of how Roots of Empathy students develop competencies through decision making activities. In this Theme, students have an opportunity to explore some of the choices parents have to make around diapering their baby. During the Pre-Family Visit with younger children, the students consider what parents put in their diaper bag when they take the baby on an outing. The students make a list of necessary items for baby, which

¹ Blair, C. & Peters-Razza, R. (2007). Relating effortful control, executive function, and false belief understanding to emerging math and literacy ability in Kindergarten. *Child Development*, 78(2), 647-663.



gives insight into their planning and organizational abilities. Older students in the Pre-Family Visit work in small groups to build consensus on what they collectively think is the most responsible decision around choosing the diaper-type. They need to factor in what is most cost-effective, comfortable, convenient and environmentally responsible, using a problem-solving format which encourages children to take multiple perspectives including all their group members and those of the parent and the baby. In the Family Visits, the parent shows what is in the diaper bag. With older students, this includes showing the type of diaper the family has chosen, and the students compare their predictions to what the parent has brought. Each of these activities supports the development of decision-making in students.

The landscape of childhood today does not provide children with many opportunities to plan, problem-solve and make decisions because most of their time is organized by adults. When they become teenagers, without having a backdrop of experience in knowing how to weigh the risk factors of certain behaviours and without the necessary skills to think through a sequence of what-ifs, children may flounder and be at risk.



Roots of Empathy provides natural, experiential opportunities for children to focus their attention, gain insight into impulsive behaviour, revisit previous information and use new information, and to develop the capacity to plan, problem-solve and make decisions. Roots of Empathy provides children with executive functioning skills that are skills for the 21st century. These skills complement the core curriculum and are central to the optimal development of the whole child.

With respect,

Mary Gordon

Mary Gordon
Founder/President, Roots of Empathy

