

Roots of Empathy

MENTORING MESSAGES FROM MARY



LETTER 3

Dear Roots of Empathy Instructors,

In this letter, I focus on the hugely important attachment and attunement relationship as well as the centrality of children's literature in the Roots of Empathy curriculum.

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:

- In my Roots of Empathy training, my Trainer went over reading a story for the first time without stopping. Why do we read books this way?
- The local media would like to do a story on Roots of Empathy at our school. What do I do?
- My Mentor has contacted me and would like to visit my Roots of Empathy class. How do I prepare?

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



Highlighting Attachment and Attunement

In Roots of Empathy, the baby is not the only lever for the development of empathy in children. The attachment and attunement between the parent and the baby also allow the children to see empathy happening in front of their eyes. This experiential learning around the Green Blanket is biologically embedded in the children's brains, changing both its structure and function.

Long-term research on Roots of Empathy has proven that children's behaviour changes during and after the program. This change in behaviour, which lasts for years, is not due to external monitoring by an adult; it is because the child has changed on the inside. Neuroscientists believe the experiences around the Green Blanket lay down new tracks in children's brains, creating a lifelong memory of what love looks like and feels like. Memory in childhood can be deep and transformative when cognition and emotion work together in the experience. This is the power of Roots of Empathy.

As Instructors, you can create opportunities for the children to observe the attunement between the baby and the parent. If the baby is in a calm alert state, you can encourage a turn-taking conversation. Explain to the children that the mother is going to say something to the baby and that we will quietly count down five seconds, giving the baby a chance to neurologically process and then either respond or not. If the baby chooses not to engage in the conversation, we can respect the rights of this little individual and say, “The baby isn’t interested in having a chat right now.” However, if the baby does respond, the repeated exchange can last several minutes. This conversation is one of the most powerful ways that children learn about deep communication and the power that an attuned mother has to engage with her baby in a matched emotional state and with matched interest.

Empathy is the ability to understand how another person feels.

Empathy Action

The Use of Children’s Literature in Roots of Empathy



Children in this Grade 6 class are engaged in the process of perspective taking, the cognitive aspect of empathy.

The Roots of Empathy post-story discussions are empathy-based conversations where the children readily take the perspective of each other and care about how each person feels. The children’s authenticity and comfort level during these discussions are key elements for successfully developing empathy.

Human beings have always been drawn together through the power of story. The experience of sharing in a group the emotions which stories elicit has a collective impact which creates a connection with the audience. One of the ways Roots of Empathy changes the classroom climate



is through the shared experience of stories followed by discussion and activities. Together, the experience and discussion deepen the children's emotional vocabulary and create opportunities for shared perspective taking. Perspective taking is the cognitive aspect of empathy.

The children's literature that we have chosen does not attempt to teach or preach but rather to *reach*. Our curriculum is structured to focus on perspective taking; the children focus on each story's protagonist and imagine how that central character felt. As they imagine themselves in the shoes of the protagonist, the children learn perspective taking. The children we see pictured are emotionally connected to and invested in the story that they are hearing and are engaged in the process of perspective taking.



The experience of being a part of an audience will be new for some children. During the Roots of Empathy story readings, we engage children as members of an audience, and we create a tradition of expected behaviour where the children completely relax without pressure to impress the teacher or their classmates. The children become extremely attentive as we encourage reflective dialogue regarding the emotional shades of the story, rather than bombarding them with their recalled factual details of the story. Authentic dialogue develops naturally when the pressure for details is eclipsed by the invitation to comment on the feelings and thoughts that the story evokes and the meaningful connections to the children's lives.

As one teacher said, "Roots of Empathy's specially chosen books give classroom teachers an opportunity to better understand the social and emotional lives of our students. The students are able to take the perspective of the characters in the books thus giving them a platform to share their feelings. After reading a book during the Crying theme, our Instructor led the students in a discussion about how the characters in the book felt sad and left out, and followed by asking the children to reflect and share a time when they felt sad. One little girl in my class shared she was sad because her baby brother had died. I was grateful to the Roots of Empathy program, as I had noticed that over the week she hadn't been herself and I was finding it hard to reach her family. This authentic conversation which followed the book allowed me to support both her and her family."

With respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Gordon". The script is cursive and fluid.

Mary Gordon
Founder/President, Roots of Empathy

