

Foreword

BY DANIEL J. SIEGEL, MD

Empathy comes in many colors. Often we think of our ability to see from another person's perspective as the essence of social intelligence. This cognitive form of empathy reveals how we make maps of others' minds to understand how they feel, what they think, and even imagine ourselves walking in their mental shoes. Others can also "feel felt" by us, sensing that their feelings are in tune with ours—that we resonate with their own inner life. This form of emotional empathy enables us to feel close and comforted, to sense that others are connected to us beneath and beyond the logic and linear thinking of linguistic language. And even more, others can feel that we are concerned about them, that we have compassion for their pain, take joy in their triumphs. This empathic concern is yet another color on empathy's rainbow.

In each hue of empathy we see and we feel and we care about the inner mental sea of others around us. But how do we come to learn this capacity to sense the mind beneath behavior? This perceptual skill, what can be called "mindsight," enables us to sense the inner flow of information and energy that is at the heart of our subjective lives. Mindsight is the mechanism underlying social and emotional intelligence and permits us to know both the minds of others and of ourselves. Once we can see more clearly into this inner dimension of our human lives, we can actually learn to modify our thoughts and feelings more effectively and move our lives toward health and well-being.

For this reason, children who develop social and emotional competence are happier, have more rewarding relationships with their peers, are more resilient in the face of stress, and even perform better academically. Mindsight skills enable us to be more thoughtful, focused, and resourceful. How do we learn such important skills? And if these mindsight-based abilities are so helpful, why isn't everyone just making these reflective lessons the basic "fourth R" of education?

A simple response to these urgent questions rests between the covers of this important book. Mary Gordon has created a brilliant strategy for teaching young children the essential skills to see the mind within each person—and ultimately even within the pupils themselves. By introducing a baby into the school year's regular activities, students enter a receptive state of mind, open to seeing not only the soft signals of affection between mother and child, but also the non-verbal communication sent from baby to eagerly observing pupil. The baby comes ready to connect—and the invitation is inescapable to come wide-eyed and mind-open to receiving what nature intended: care, connection, and communication.

In the students' own brain, circuits of compassion likely light up as they themselves become receptive to these crucial conduits of curiosity and concern: Is the baby sleepy? Is she hungry? Does he want to play? Why is he crying? He's so much bigger than last month—wow, has he learned some new skills? What is her brain doing now that it couldn't do last time? Was I really that way when I was a baby?

As students remain open to the baby's feelings, they become open to their own. Neuroscience tells us that the flow of sensations upward from the regions below our thinking cortex—from our body-proper with its heart and intestines, from our deep fight-flight-freeze mediating brainstem, and our motivating, emotion-powered, attachment-generating limbic area—

create the basis for empathy. We literally feel in our lower neural circuits what we see in someone else. Driven initially by “mirror neurons” that permit us to enact behavioral imitation and emotional simulation, we move and feel in ways that reflect what we see in someone else. It is this openness to our own embodied response that creates the foundation for feeling another’s feelings. Moving upward into our awareness-creating prefrontal cortex, we begin to sense our internal world and attribute what we feel to what we may perceive inside of someone else.

The Roots of Empathy curriculum is ready to support this flow of compassion from its bodily resonance up to its cortical curiosity. With reflective dialogues that look inward to the internal nature of our feelings and thoughts, motivations driving behaviors, and our relationship-needs, students are given not only the baby as an instructor, but teacher and pupil embark on a mindsight journey into the very nature of what it means to be human. Empathy in all its forms is encouraged and cultivated in this science-based, emotion-inspiring, life-changing immersion in the inner world of human development.

The circuits of empathy stimulated in the Roots program could be written down in words and even drawn in maps of the brain. But the most effective way of activating them directly is by immersion in personal and group experience. Mary Gordon is an artist of neural engagement, painting the full spectrum of empathy in a canvas all students, young and old, enrolled and enthralled, can be inspired to weave into their own neural architecture. In neuroscience we say that “neurons that fire together, wire together.” When students open their minds to the full breadth of a baby’s inner and interpersonal life, they too embrace the vulnerability and dignity each of us deserves in this world. When pupils feel about the mind, when they talk about the mind, when they are given time to reflect upon the

mind, then mindsight has become the central theme of the class lesson. Roots of Empathy breathes the most basic language of emotional and social intelligence, of the importance of seeing the mind inside each of us, so that bullying decreases, empathy increases, and care and concern become a natural way of being—not just a rule posted on the wall or something students struggle to try to remember.

Recently I was teaching near one of the Roots of Empathy classrooms and a taxi driver told me a story of when he was trained to be a cabbie in Vancouver. He said that in the city's program, they blindfolded each of the prospective drivers and had them walk around a building for a while to experience what being blind was like. He said that since that learning experience, whenever he picks up a vision-impaired passenger he has a totally different response now that he has "felt what it is like to be them." Roots of Empathy reminds each student fortunate enough to have this marvelous program of what being vulnerable feels like—and how we need to care for each other in this complex world. It also reminds them of what a joyous and simple life can be filled with—and how the basics of human interaction are enriched with kindness and care. Feeling the inner world and respecting others become as natural in this empathic classroom as a baby's wide-eyed gaze and infectious smile.

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