

## Research on Roots of Empathy

Since 2000, the Roots of Empathy program has been evaluated in both comparative and randomized controlled (experimental) studies designed to measure changes in the behaviour of participating students. This research has been conducted in numerous countries across three continents.

## Evidence of Impact

Key research findings show that Roots of Empathy children perceived a more positive classroom environment by the end of the program (e.g. increased sense of classroom belonging and peer acceptance).

Independent research has found that Roots of Empathy children experience:

- An *increase* in social and emotional understanding.<sup>1,2</sup>
- An *increase* in prosocial behaviours (such as sharing, helping and including) and a *decrease* in aggressive behaviours.<sup>1,3,5,7</sup>
- *Greater* acceptance towards their peers and an *increased* sense of belonging to a caring and supportive classroom.<sup>4,6</sup>
- An *increase* in knowledge of infant development<sup>3,7</sup>.
- An *increase* in empathy<sup>7</sup>.
- Long-term effects of *reducing* aggression.<sup>2,5,7</sup>

## Our Lasting Impact

In 2001, the Government of Manitoba commissioned a three-year study of the Roots of Empathy program, measuring prosocial behaviour, physical aggression, and indirect aggression in children. The three target grade levels were kindergarten, grade four, and grade eight. Results of the study showed that Roots of Empathy children exhibited a decrease in physical and indirect aggression, both immediately and three-years after program completion (Santos et al, 2011). The study also found an increase in prosocial behaviours (sharing, helping) in children immediately following the program.

Furthermore, an evaluation of the Roots of Empathy program by researchers at Bern University in Switzerland (2015-2017) found that Roots of Empathy children showed a significant decrease in aggression and an increase in empathy, when compared with control groups. These results were maintained one year after program completion (Latsch et al., 2017).

Finally, a longitudinal evaluation conducted by Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, found that Roots of Empathy had a measurable and positive impact, demonstrating an increase in children's prosocial behaviour and a reduction in aggressive and difficult behaviour (Connolly, 2018). The study suggests that the program may have a sustainable effect in terms of reducing difficult behaviour and further research is recommended to explore this.

Within a Roots of Empathy classroom, these changes in student behaviour translate into a community where helping, sharing, perspective-taking and peer inclusion are the norm. Looking ahead, new national and international studies will expand our understanding of the impact of Roots of Empathy.

## Additional Research and Support for the Program

A University of Missouri report by Dr. Marvin Berkowitz titled *What Works in Character Education: A Report for Policy Makers and Opinion Leaders* reviewed character education programs and concluded that there was scientific evidence of the effectiveness of Roots of Empathy, and particularly strong evidence for its potential to reduce aggression and violence.<sup>2</sup>

*“Roots of Empathy is an effective school-based curriculum for fostering the development of student character.” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005)*

Researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto evaluated the degree to which the methods and approaches support social and emotional development.<sup>3</sup> They concluded that Roots of Empathy is an effective program for developing social and emotional learning, based on scientific research on child development and professional experience of leading educators and health practitioners.

*“By providing many opportunities to see skills modeled, to apply these same skills in real-life situations, and to reflect on their learning, the program increases the chances that students will develop competencies that will guide their future behaviours and shape their dispositions” (Rolbeiser & Wallace, 2005).*

Dr. Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto, writes that the program is solidly based on scientific knowledge of the human condition.

*“ROE is a simple, brilliant and powerful example of how developing children’s empathy can be a priority and can be accomplished with amazing results. The heart is the way to the mind, but they have to be explicitly linked. Roots of Empathy is a model of social and academic inclusion”.*

- <sup>1</sup> Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Smith, V., Zaidman-Zait, A., & Hertzman, C. (2012). Promoting children's prosocial behaviours in school: Impact of the "Roots of Empathy" program on the social and emotional competence of school-aged children. *School Mental Health* 4(1), 12.  
<http://cemh.lbpsb.qc.ca/professionals/RootsofEmpathy.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Santos, R. G., Chartier, M. J., Whalen, J. C., Chateau, D., & Boyd, L. (2011). Effectiveness of school-based violence prevention for children and youth: Cluster randomized field trial of the Roots of Empathy program with replication and three-year follow-up. *Healthcare Quarterly*, 14, 80-91.  
[http://www.longwoods.com/articles/images/HQ\\_vol14\\_ChildHealth\\_Issue2\\_Santos.pdf](http://www.longwoods.com/articles/images/HQ_vol14_ChildHealth_Issue2_Santos.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> MacDonald, A., Bell, P., McLafferty, M., McCorkell, L., Walker, I., Smith, V., Balfour, A., & Murphy, P. (2013). *Evaluation of the Roots of Empathy Programme by North Lanarkshire Psychological Service*. North Lanarkshire Psychological Service Research (unpublished).
- <sup>4</sup> Smith, V. (2008, February). *Roots of Empathy: program effects on grade one children's social, emotional and academic adjustment*. University of Alberta, Department of Educational Psychology.
- <sup>5</sup> Connolly, P., Miller, S., Kee, F., Sloan, S., Gildea, A., McIntosh, E., Boyer, N., & Bland, M. (2018). *A cluster randomised controlled trial and evaluation and cost-effectiveness analysis of the Roots of Empathy schools-based programme for improving social and emotional well-being outcomes among 8- to 9-year-olds in Northern Ireland*. NIHR Journals Library.
- <sup>6</sup> Cain, G., & Carnellor, Y. (2008). 'Roots of Empathy': A research study on its impact on teachers in Western Australia. *Journal of Student Wellbeing*, 2(1), 52-73.
- <sup>7</sup> Latsch, D., Stauffer, M., & Bollinger, M. (2017). Evaluation of the Roots of Empathy program in Switzerland, years 2015 to 2017. Full Report. Bern: Bern University of Applied Science.
- <sup>8</sup> Berkowitz, M., and Bier, M. (2005) *What Works in Character Education: A Report for Policy Makers and Opinion Leaders*. Character Education Partnership.
- <sup>9</sup> Rolheiser, C., and Wallace, D. (2005). *The Roots of Empathy program as a strategy for increasing social and emotional learning*. Report prepared for Roots of Empathy. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.