

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.  
Visit us at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or call (800) 221-2864.  
Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.

## Sowing Seeds of Empathy

by Mary Gordon

Fifteen small children are gathered in a circle around a lavender blanket. They are wriggling with excitement, but also unusually focused. The children's eyes are glued on the open door of their child care centre.

"I see him!" a few of them call out, as six-month-old Jack is carried into the room by Elanna, his mother, for his fourth family visit. Baby Jack is wearing jeans and a Seeds of Empathy T-shirt that says "Teacher." Grace, the Family Guide leading the lesson, begins singing the Welcome Song, and the children join in as Elanna walks around the inside of the circle holding Jack at the children's eye level. Each child stands and greets the baby by touching his foot "hello."

PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR



They all sit down together around the lavender blanket, including Grace, Elanna, and Baby Jack. Elanna settles her son in front of her, and the children gasp in amazement.

"Look everybody, Jack is sitting up today. Could he do that before?" asks Grace.

"No!" the children answer in unison. They are all leaning forward, studying the baby intently.

"What else is different about him today?"

"A new tooth!" says one boy.

"He can bounce!" says a girl beside him.

Sure enough, he can. Jack is bouncing and moving his arms excitedly. He is smiling, gurgling, and looking around at the children.

"What do you think he's feeling right now?" asks Grace.

"He's happy to see us!" exclaims Thomas, who is sitting near Jack. It's a big moment, because most of the time Thomas is much less exuberant. The children are led in discussion as to whether Jack's excitement is because he's happy to see them, because he's proud of his new achievement, or a bit of both.

Scenes like this one, where young children become cognizant of a young infant and attuned to his or her feelings and intentions, are typical in Seeds of Empathy, a program designed for early childhood settings. The program fosters empathy, social and emotional competence, and early literacy skills and attitudes in children three to five years of age, while providing professional development for their educators.

In Seeds of Empathy, a program I founded in 2005, the heart of the program is a neighbourhood infant and parent who visit a child care centre over a program year. The loving attachment and attunement relationship between



Mary Gordon is recognized internationally as an educator, social entrepreneur, author, child advocate, parenting expert who is the Founder and President of Roots of Empathy, a nonprofit organization which offers empathy-based programs for children. In 1981 Ms. Gordon founded Canada's first and largest school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, which have been used as a best practice model internationally. Ms. Gordon is an Ashoka Fellow, which recognizes her as a member of an international circle of social entrepreneurs who have developed system-changing solutions for some of the world's most pressing problems. In 2008, Roots of Empathy was one of three winners in a global competition from Changemakers for programs that help youth at risk. Her 2005 Canadian bestseller, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, was ranked as one of the Top 100 Books of the Year.

infant and parent is a perfect example of empathy and becomes a powerful model for experiential learning.

All babies arrive pre-programmed for empathy, and it is through the attachment relationship that empathy flourishes or fades. Seeds of Empathy supports all children in further developing their empathy. By observing the facial expressions, movements and vocalizations of a baby like Jack, children become young scientists gathered around the 'laboratory' of our lavender blanket, carefully and collectively uncovering the cues that spell out what Jack is feeling. The baby is the 'teacher' and a lever that a trained Seeds of Empathy Family Guide (a staff member at the centre) uses to help children learn to identify and reflect on their own feelings and those of others (empathy). The emotional literacy taught in the program is a foundational literacy and a universal literacy, our own Esperanto.

The Seeds of Empathy curriculum involves a series of ten themes, each on a three-week cycle anchored by family visits, although these are only one part of the program. The second part involves what we call literacy circles, where Literacy Coaches (specially-trained staff from the centre) read books with the children that reflect the curriculum associated with each theme. Compared to the family visits, literacy circles happen in smaller groups (up to eight children sitting around smaller lavender blankets) to facilitate intimacy.

Seeds of Empathy is a program with high standards of fidelity. To participate in a new program, staff at a child care centre receive three days of training and are supported by on-going mentoring and professional development throughout the year, and for as long as they run the program. Each Seeds of Empathy program is accredited annually.

PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR



**Making sure that all children receive the early social and emotional grounding they need at an early age is one of the most effective strategies we can employ to create a better society.**

that all children receive the early social and emotional grounding they need at an early age is one of the most effective strategies we can employ to create a better society. Research tells us that children's social and emotional competence is a great predictor of their

later-life success and happiness.

In schools, there has long been an absence of understanding about the importance of social and emotional development as part of a child's education. On the other hand, in child care settings it has long been acknowledged that all learning happens through a social and emotional lens. It is because of the warmth of the relationship between the early childhood educator, and the child he or she interacts with, that they become powerful models for the children in their care.

Our entire literacy program is predicated on young children emulating the likes and dislikes of their early childhood teachers. Much as Jane Jacobs wrote about successful neighbourhoods having front stoops where we have our eye on the street and one another, successful child care centres understand that the children watch the adults and take from them attitudes toward learning, relating, and in our case, falling in love with books and the idea of reading.

### The Ultimate Human Trait

Empathy is the ultimate human trait; it is the connective tissue between Martin Buber's "I" and "Thou." Seeds of Empathy asks children to reflect on another person's perspective (the cognitive aspect of empathy) and to understand what that person is feeling, given their perspective (the affective side of empathy). Educators delight in seeing the Theory of Mind flourish in our programs, and Dr. Carol Gilligan of NYU, who recently wrote about our empathy-based programs, sees the opportunity for children's moral development.

Empathy acts as a brake against violence and aggression. Without empathy, we have no hope of understanding each other, and it is easy to marginalize people we decide are not like us. There can be no end to wars and genocides and all manner of suffering without empathy. Empathy cannot be taught, but it can be caught. What I mean by this is that empathy is not a concept that can be learned didactically.

### Social and Emotional Literacy

Due to the plasticity of the brain and its responsiveness to learning through relationships in the early years, my claim has always been that, in fact, "love grows brains." Making sure

It must be experienced to be understood.

## Limbic Learning and School Readiness

Gathering around the lavender blanket with the Seeds of Empathy family, or reading carefully selected books in small groups guided by a Literacy Coach, are huge opportunities for children to experience what I call 'limbic learning' — learning with both emotion and cognition fully involved. This kind of learning is a powerful experience that can only happen when emotional development is also taking place. Through our training and curriculum, ECE staff are anchored by the power of their caring relationship with the children to advance limbic learning opportunities.

Seeds of Empathy brings traditional literacy and social and emotional development together into one experience. The literacy circle component is unique in that the curriculum is written as a course for educators, providing guidance on how to use each story's rich content to facilitate children's social and emotional and early literacy development. Attitudes toward reading are formed early through caring relationships, which is why Seeds of Empathy harnesses the power of this existing relationship.

We operate on the premise that school readiness is not about numbers and letters; it's about children who feel excited, confident, are curious, creative, and emotionally ready to problem solve and cope with stress. Seeds of Empathy has as a goal the nurturing of both emotional literacy and positive attitudes towards traditional literacy.

Empathy cannot be taught, but it can be caught. . . . It must be experienced to be understood.

## Evidence-Based Programs

Having research behind us to verify that our programs do what they say they will do is one of our values as an organization. Seeds of Empathy has a sister program, Roots of Empathy,

which uses the same knowledge base and a comparable format, only in an elementary school context. The Roots of Empathy program has been extensively and independently researched now for more than a decade. Results have consistently shown that children in the program demonstrate substantial increases in prosocial behaviour (such as caring, sharing, and cooperating) and decreases in

## Where We Came From, and Where We're Going

I created the Roots of Empathy program in Canada in 1996 and established the nonprofit organization Roots of Empathy in 2000. To date, that program, together with Seeds of Empathy, has now reached about 450,000 children worldwide. Seeds of Empathy, the more recent of the two, is running in a number of Canadian provinces and the Greater Seattle Area in the United States. We also plan to introduce Seeds of Empathy to New York City and Scotland shortly. Roots of Empathy now runs across Canada and in six other countries (the United States, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Isle of Man, and New Zealand). Both programs are offered to a growing number of Indigenous children and communities across Canada and New Zealand.

Ashoka has been building a network of leading social entrepreneurs around the globe for the past 30 years. Its current empathy initiative is a collaborative platform for social entrepreneurs and others which aims to shift society's values, so that people come to realize that empathy is an essential skill which every child must master. In Bill Drayton's vision of an 'everyone a changemaker' world, it all starts with children developing empathy early in life. Seeds of Empathy is a proven approach to developing empathy in 3- to 5-year-olds, as is Roots of Empathy evidence-based to develop empathy in elementary school-aged children while reducing aggression. Drayton's North American Empathy movement is sequencing children's developing empathy to team-building and ultimately leadership skills.



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

aggression. This is significant because children in comparison groups show increased aggression across the year.

Now, research into the Seeds of Empathy program is starting to show the same positive results, and the knowledge base will be growing in some very exciting directions in the years ahead. Seeds of Empathy research began with a process evaluation in 2008 that indicated that early childhood educators noticed increases in their own growth in the area of social-emotional development and felt more valued and respected in their child care teams and a greater sense of job satisfaction as a result of the program. They also noticed many benefits among children at their centres, including a greater ability to understand and talk about feelings and an increased ability to show concern for peers (Jaramillo, Buote, & Schonert-Reichl, 2008).

This year at the University of Washington's Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences (I-LABS), Drs. Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl are conducting a behavioural and brain-

based study of the Seeds of Empathy program in Seattle. The brain-based component is particularly important, as this is one of the first neurophysiological studies ever to measure how a social and emotional learning program actually affects a child's brain. Neurophysiological evaluations will entail investigation of structural (MRI) and functional (MEG brain imaging) changes associated with participation in the program. Other behavioural and brain-based Seeds of Empathy studies are also ongoing in Canada.

— ■ —

## Reference

Jaramillo, A., Buote, D., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2008). An evaluation of the implementation of the "Seeds of Empathy" program. Report prepared for Roots of Empathy. University of British Columbia.



If you are interested in bringing the program to your area, please contact our Seeds of Empathy International Manager, Carolyn Parkes, at [cparkes@seedsofempathy.org](mailto:cparkes@seedsofempathy.org). For more information about Seeds of Empathy, please visit [www.seedsofempathy.org](http://www.seedsofempathy.org).