

# Roots of Empathy Key Information

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## What is Roots of Empathy?

Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom program that has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among elementary school children, while raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy. Our vision is to change the world, child by child.

## Mission

Our mission is to build caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults.

## History and Reach

In 1996, Roots of Empathy was created in Toronto schools by Mary Gordon. It became a charitable not-for-profit organization in 2000. Since its inception, Roots of Empathy has reached over 450,000 children.

The program reaches elementary school children from Kindergarten to Grade 8 across Canada, in English and French, in rural, urban and remote communities including Aboriginal communities. Recognized as "Canada's olive branch to the world", it is also delivered internationally in New Zealand, the United States, the Isle of Man, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with a number of other countries working to launch it in subsequent years.

Roots of Empathy was one of three winners of an international Changemakers award for programs which prevent aggression among boys-at-risk.

Roots of Empathy also has a "younger sibling" called Seeds of Empathy, which is intended for children ages three to five in childcare settings.

## Roots of Empathy in Action

At the heart of the program are a neighbourhood parent and baby (2 to 4 months at the start) who visit a classroom nine times over the course of a school year. A trained Instructor coaches the students to observe the baby's development and to label the baby's feelings. In this experiential learning, the baby is the "Teacher" and a catalyst that the Instructor uses to help children identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others – empathy. The Instructor also visits before and after each family visit to reinforce teachings. There are 27 classroom visits in total in a Roots of Empathy program.

As part of this Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program, children develop emotional literacy and learn to regulate their emotions. Research has shown that children who increase their social and emotional learning also increase their academic performance.

## Research on Roots of Empathy

Research has shown that children who have the program know more about emotions and feelings, are kinder to their friends, are less aggressive and bully other children less than those who do not participate in the program.

## Roots of Empathy Key Information

Since 2000, there have been various national and international independent evaluations of the effectiveness of Roots of Empathy. Five Key Findings include:

- Key Finding #1: Decrease in Aggression  
Why is it important? Aggressive children are at higher risk of depression, suicide attempts, alcohol and drug abuse, violent crimes, and neglectful and abusive parenting (*Tremblay et al., 2004*).
- Key Finding #2: Increase in Social and Emotional Understanding  
Why is it important? Students who participate in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs show evidence of improvement in numerous areas of their social, personal, and academic lives. In particular, participation in SEL programs cultivates positive effects on students' social-emotional skills, social behaviours, attitudes toward self and others conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Payton et al., 2008).
- Key Finding #3: Creating more Caring and Supportive Children  
Why is it important? Quality relationships and perceived social support are powerful protective factors that increase resilience to negative and stressful experiences (*Powers, Ressler, & Bradley, 2009*).
- Key Finding #4: Increase in Knowledge of Parenting and Needs of Babies  
Why is it important? Sensitive and responsive caregivers in infancy and early childhood protect against stress and reduce vulnerability to future psychopathology (*Luthar & Brown, 2007*).
- Key Finding #5: Lasting Results  
Why is it important? Improvements in behaviour were maintained up to three years after the end of the Roots of Empathy program (*Santos et al., 2011*).

### About Mary Gordon

Mary Gordon is recognized internationally as a visionary educator, award-winning social entrepreneur, Canada's top social innovator (Manning Award), author, child advocate and parenting expert who has created programs informed by the power of empathy. In 1996, she created the Roots of Empathy program, which is now offered in every province in Canada, and internationally. In 2005, Ms Gordon created the Seeds of Empathy program. She is a Member of the Order of Canada and an Ashoka Fellow.

Ms Gordon speaks and consults to governments, educational organizations, and public institutions. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards recognizing her contribution to innovation in education and international social entrepreneurship, including the 2009 Public Education Advocacy Award from the Canadian Teachers' Federation. Her 2005 book, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, is a Canadian bestseller. In 2011, Ms Gordon was named an Ashoka Globalizer, joining a select group of Ashoka Fellows in extending their message and impact globally. She is a member of the Executive Board of Directors of the Global Ashoka. Ms Gordon has three times had dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in Canada, the United States and India.

**For more information, please visit: [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)**

