The Problem

The Empathy Deficit: The absence of empathy underlies war, genocide, neglect, racism, abuse and marginalization of all kinds. Without empathy there is insufficient traction for conflict resolution and altruism is not possible. Empathy – the ability to understand how others feel – is at the core of our humanity.

The Innovation

Roots of Empathy’s mission is to build caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults. Developing empathy is the key to building understanding and breaking cycles of violence. The Roots of Empathy innovation is the discovery that we can do this most effectively with a tiny baby providing experiential learning for children in their classrooms.

Before she launched Roots of Empathy in Toronto in 1996, Mary Gordon founded Canada’s first and largest school-based Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. Through this work, she conducted outreach with many young mothers in abusive situations, whose infants and young toddlers were often abused or neglected themselves. Gordon noticed the commonality that the parents of these children seemed to lack a sufficient capacity for empathy – they couldn’t see that their children were being wounded emotionally. She extrapolated this lack of empathy to the domestic violence she knew was in these women’s lives and the societal and global violence in the world.

From this beginning she developed the understanding that a secure attachment relationship between an infant and parent is the key to developing empathy. Gordon is continuing to leverage that attachment relationship through Roots of Empathy. Her system-changing is that we can change the world in the next generation using the loving relationship between a baby and a parent as a model for fostering empathy in children.

“What I’m capitalizing on is empathy as the lever for change.”

Mary Gordon

In the Roots of Empathy program, a parent and baby (who is two to four months old at the start of the program) visit a classroom nine times over the course of a school year. A trained Roots of Empathy Instructor guides the children as they observe the relationship between the baby and parent and follow the baby’s development. Learning is reinforced through Instructor visits the week before and the week after each Family Visit, with the full program encompassing 27 classroom visits in total. In this experiential learning, the baby is the “Teacher” and a lever, which the Instructor uses to help children identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others.

Barriers to development

- **Human capacity:** Instructors in the ROE program receive extensive training, have access to a Mentor for support, and must successfully deliver a year of the program before they can be certified. Ensuring the long-term commitment of Instructors is a key to maintaining the program. Cultivating Instructors who might become Mentors is a cornerstone of expansion.

- **Program integrity:** Processes and systems need to be in place so that Roots of Empathy can grow while maintaining fidelity to its goals and the evidence base that documents its effectiveness.

- **Funding:** Funding sources must be diversified so that programs are sustainable through changing economic and political climates.

- **Influence:** School systems are hard to influence. The program has had to demonstrate that its application in the classroom would help the teacher reach his/her outcomes. Relationships had to be built with both the academic and administrative arms of the school system, from school trustees to superintendents, from principals to the teachers’ unions.
The connection between parent and baby is a powerful influence on children. Through the relationship that they develop with their Roots of Empathy baby, they come to understand how the baby feels and develop a vocabulary for the baby’s feelings that results in a deeper understanding of themselves and one another.

Roots of Empathy helps children develop intrinsic motivation and intrinsic pride. Through the Roots of Empathy program children develop new behaviours and approaches in their relationships that will stay with them for life.

The program began as a not-for-profit charitable organization with a Canadian vision but quickly became international in scope. The program is now active in New Zealand, the United States, Isle of Man, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Germany. Gordon has just completed work with Bridgespan Consulting on a strategic plan to scale the program throughout the United States. The McConnell Family Foundation has also supported overall organizational strengthening to help enable this expansion. The Bridgespan process will support proper resourcing and sustainable implementation over several years. Roots of Empathy is also working through Ashoka’s Globalizer program to develop a scaling model for other parts of the world.

New Horizons

The program will launch in Saskatchewan and in Germany in 2011. It is also poised for growth in the United States.

For program growth to be sustainable and successful, in the immediate future the demographic focus is on countries that show readiness. Indigenous communities are also a focus for Roots of Empathy’s work worldwide.

Roots of Empathy is looking for a more diversified approach to obtain additional funding sources beyond its traditional mix, which has been heavily dependent on government support. The Royal Bank has recently supported Roots of Empathy in children’s mental health initiatives and expansion involving Aboriginal children. The organization is continuing to look at more corporate funders and individual funders.

Trends in ROE classrooms

Since 2000, there have been nine independent evaluations of the effectiveness of Roots of Empathy, as well as two reviews of the program as a whole. Key research findings show that children in the Roots of Empathy program exhibit:

- A decrease in aggression
- An increase in pro-social behavior
- An increase in social and emotional understanding
- An increase in knowledge of parenting
- The perception of a caring classroom environment

A follow-up study of the program also indicates that improvements in pro-social behaviours and reduced aggression are maintained for years afterwards.

Further information is available at www.rootsofempathy.com

The cascading impact possible through the Roots of Empathy program is immense.

Children learn to celebrate the differences between one another. Through the baby they become keenly aware of the baby’s humanity and their shared humanity. These behaviours are expressed beyond the classroom setting and are reflected in their adult lives. Neuroscientists say that the Roots of Empathy experience is biologically embedded in children’s brains.

“Roots of Empathy develops social and emotional capacity in children, and this profoundly changes them for life. The hope is that this change can make a big difference in the future as children grow into responsive parents and responsible citizens, and as they take their places in the board rooms and war rooms of our world.” Mary Gordon

The net impact of building levels of empathy is a more caring, peaceful, and civil society.

Roots of Empathy is trying to break intergenerational cycles of violence. Empathy is at the core of all pro-social behaviour. The absence of empathy is at the core of all anti-social behaviour.

A framework for peace requires an architecture of empathy.

A six-year-old child who experiences Roots of Empathy learns to include others. As children develop empathy, the capacity to understand how others feel, they internalize a sense of social justice. Children understand that like their baby, everyone has a right to belong. They also become aware of the need to take action to challenge cruelty and injustice. Roots of Empathy inspires social action.