

# SECTION ONE



## *Roots of Empathy*

## FROM A TINY SEED



**I**MAGINE A GRADE 3 CLASSROOM. Recess has just ended and the children are shouting across the room to one another, still caught up in the game that they played outside. The teacher is about to raise her hand—the cue for them to settle down. The Roots of Empathy instructor has arrived and is spreading a green blanket on the floor. It is as if a spell has been cast. Quietly, the children arrange themselves cross-legged on the floor around the blanket. The hush in the room is palpable. The classroom door opens. A young mother is standing there with her five-month-old baby. The baby is wriggling in his mother’s arms; his legs are drumming against his mother’s body. He is clearly excited. Without prompting, the children break out in a greeting song: “Hello,

Tomas, how are you? How are you? How are you? Hello, Tomas, how are you? How are you today?”

Tomas and his mother walk around the green blanket greeting each child in turn. Mom sits down and places Tomas on his tummy; the children wait eagerly to see what he will do. It is time to ask Mom what life with Tomas has been like over the month since Tomas last visited the classroom. Has the baby laughed yet? Has Tomas tried any food? Can he roll over yet? Did his first tooth come in?

The instructor kneels on the blanket and holds up a toy. It is one that Tomas has not shown interest in before. It's colourful, it has bold patterns, it has different textures and it makes a delightful jingling sound: a multisensory learning tool. In an earlier class the instructor has taught the students that babies learn through their senses, that neurons form synaptic connections from environmental stimuli. As the children watch Tomas's face and body react to hearing the jingle, they snap their fingers—demonstrating the surge of electricity that is connecting neurons in Tomas's brain. The children appreciate that Tomas has to coordinate vision and hearing to find the toy, just as they had to coordinate balancing and pedalling when learning to ride a two-wheeler. They continue watching closely as Tomas tries to locate where the jingle is coming from and, as his eyes find the toy, they snap their fingers again, but this time the snapping is accompanied by excited shouts of encouragement: “Way to go, Tomas!” Tomas's brain is growing. And the children catch that moment of growth.

Tomas's mother is impressed by the interest the children take in her son's development and moved by their obvious excitement at every new thing Tomas learns.

The children have spent time with the instructor the previous week preparing for Tomas's visit, predicting what he will be able to do. They will spend time in the week after Tomas's visit exploring what they learned and connecting it to their own development

and feelings. And then the big leap—gaining an understanding of their classmates' feelings.

This is a snapshot of a few moments in a Roots of Empathy classroom. Tomas and his mother will visit this class every month for the school year. The children will be coached by the instructor to observe the parent–child relationship, the baby's development, the baby's temperament, their own temperament and that of their classmates. They will learn about infant safety and issues that have an impact on their own well-being and security. They will learn how an understanding of temperament and gaining insights into their own emotions and those of others leads to empathy and builds rich human relationships.

### *Sowing Seeds of Empathy*

*Darren was the oldest child I ever saw in a Roots of Empathy class. He was in Grade 8 and had been held back twice. He was two years older than everyone else and already starting to grow a beard. I knew his story: his mother had been murdered in front of his eyes when he was four years old, and he had lived in a succession of foster homes ever since. Darren looked menacing because he wanted us to know he was tough: his head was shaved except for a ponytail at the top and he had a tattoo on the back of his head.*

*The instructor of the Roots of Empathy program was explaining to the class about differences in temperament that day. She invited the young mother who was visiting the class with Evan, her six-month-old baby, to share her thoughts about her baby's temperament. Joining in the discussion, the mother told the class how Evan liked to face outwards when he was in the Snugli and didn't want to cuddle into her, and how she would have preferred to have a more cuddly baby. As the class ended, the mother asked if anyone wanted to try on the Snugli, which was green and trimmed with pink brocade. To everyone's surprise, Darren offered to try it, and as the other students scrambled to get ready for lunch, he strapped it on. Then*

*he asked if he could put Evan in. The mother was a little apprehensive, but she handed him the baby, and he put Evan in, facing towards his chest. That wise little baby snuggled right in, and Darren took him into a quiet corner and rocked back and forth with the baby in his arms for several minutes. Finally, he came back to where the mother and the Roots of Empathy instructor were waiting and he asked: "If nobody has ever loved you, do you think you could still be a good father?"*

A seed has been sown here. This boy, who has seen things no child should see, whose young life has been marked by abandonment, who has struggled to the age of fourteen with scarcely a memory of love, has seen a glimmer of hope. Through these moments of contact with the uncritical affection of the baby, an adolescent boy has caught an image of himself as a parent that runs counter to his loveless childhood. The baby may have changed the trajectory of this youth's future by allowing him to see the humanity in himself. For eight years now I have seen the lights go on for children in Roots of Empathy classes as we give them a working model of loving and responsive parenting and an opportunity to interact with an infant in the first year of life.

Roots of Empathy is a program for school-aged children that involves them, right in their own classrooms, in the human dynamic of the parent–baby relationship. It is a program that has the capacity to instill in our children a concept of themselves as strong and caring individuals, to give them an understanding of empathic parenting and to inspire in them a vision of citizenship that can change the world. The program puts relationships at the centre of what creates a civil society, whether that society is a small classroom, the whole school, the community, the country or our ever-shrinking globe. The relationship story is made real for children as they connect with a baby and parent who are regular visitors to their classroom during the first year of the baby's life. The relationship between the parent and child is a template for positive, empathic human relationships. What the children learn here has

universal and far-reaching implications: it shapes how they deal with each other today, and it lays a foundation for their future as parents and citizens.

The children involved in the program and the adults who support it invariably come to know what can only be described as the wisdom of the baby. The baby's behaviour and the emotions she expresses are spontaneous and pure; they are not hidden behind layers of socialization and the biases we acquire as we grow up. To the baby every child in the class is a new experience and she is ready to engage with all of them. In her world view there are no popular children and no nasty children. What the baby does see, over and over again, are the children who are unhappy or troubled, and she usually reaches out to them. Children who have felt alienated or excluded are drawn into a circle of inclusion through the empathic contact made by the baby.

Roots of Empathy places babies in the role of teachers because babies love without borders or definition. Babies respond intuitively to love. They are blind to differences as defined by the world. It is only when young children learn from the adult world that some are more worthy than others, because of some perceived difference, that we see the unfolding of the intergenerational legacy of racism, classism and a host of other "isms."

David was nine years old and had a form of autism. His parents shared with me that David had never been invited to a birthday party by any of his classmates until the year that Roots of Empathy came into his classroom. During this year he was invited to three birthday parties. Also in this year David's feelings about himself and school took a 180-degree turn. No medicine ever affected his life as much as the inclusive response of his classmates. This changed behaviour comes from the children's new understanding of the pain of exclusion and the importance of including someone who is different. This is the transformative power of the Roots of Empathy program.

Of all the literacies of childhood, emotional literacy is the most fundamental. Feelings define our similarity as humans. Our emotions are universal. The ability to find the humanity in one another will change the way that we relate to one another. It can have a huge impact on the family, by interrupting patterns of child abuse and neglect that are so often repeated through parenting in the next generation. It can have an impact on policies that lead us into conflict or compromise. It can have an impact on our very identity as citizens of the world.

Teaching children emotional literacy and developing their capacity to take the perspective of others are key steps towards collaboration and civility; they are indispensable steps towards preventing aggressive and bullying behaviours. This is borne out by the research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy program. When children learn to draw the curtain on cruelty, they will not condone classmates bullying others. It is remarkable to see children standing up courageously to a bully. There are no onlookers or bystanders in the program, as children realize they have a responsibility to one another because they understand what it feels like to be frightened or humiliated or even physically hurt. As children develop empathy it seems to come ready-made with courage and imagination. Children understand marginalization and issues of social justice in a clear and uncluttered way.

At one school I visited, ten-year-old Jessie was lining up with the rest of her classmates to go out for lunch when one of the boys grabbed a hat right off the head of another boy. It's the kind of behaviour that is repeated every day, in every school, in every community. As adults, we often ignore it or simply sigh with exasperation. But the truth is, it has the effect of making the other child feel helpless and making him a target for ridicule.

If you have empathy, you understand how that victim feels. In the midst of a crowd of onlookers, he has to either work up the

courage to retrieve the hat or ignore the taunting boy, and carry the humiliation and loss of dignity silently into the playground. Jessie stepped out of the line-up and confronted the young fellow who took the hat and said, calmly but firmly, “Give him back his hat.” The boy looked around the line-up, weighing the reactions of the others. What he saw, I imagine, was that others in the group empathized with his victim; it could just as easily have been them. Finally he said, “Oh, take your stupid hat,” and gave it back. Not the most gracious response, perhaps, but a moral victory had been won. Jessie had acted on her feeling of empathy and the human right of that child not to be humiliated. Every child in the class had been given a new promise—that these small acts of cruelty would not be tolerated, and that they would find support if they, too, were victims. An incident like this prompts us to see that sometimes the bravest advocates wear size three sneakers.

The seeding of citizenship in the classroom is aimed at creating a level of civility in the community and building the foundation for breaking intergenerational cycles of indifference and apathy. They may be students in the classroom but they are the parents, policy-makers and electorate of the future. Roots of Empathy creates the conditions for good citizenship to grow in much the same way that farmers who are not responsible for manufacturing crops are responsible for creating the conditions under which crops can thrive. The interactive, emotionally validating conditions of the Roots of Empathy classroom create the safe backdrop for children to become all that they might be.

There is an unexpected magnificence in our children and an underestimated power in their ability to change our world for the better. It is through our children that we can go beyond the frontiers of science and technology to explore the recesses of the human heart. We have managed to harness the power of the wind, the sun and the water, but have yet to appreciate the power of our children to effect social change.

A major cause of many of the conflicts in the world is our intolerance of difference. On the world stage, differences provide the justification for genocide and war, or failure to respond in times of disaster and disease. Over the ages, differences in religion, nationality, race, culture or language have been the cause for condoned slaughter. On the playground, differences become a target for bullies, for in the difference lies the vulnerability. Bullies capitalize on differences in their victims, whether it is that the child is shorter, fatter, less popular or less athletic. The current epidemic of bullying across schools and communities in North America is on the radar screen of parents, educators, children's mental health workers and the justice system.

Roots of Empathy is a pedagogy of hope, because in our children we have an opportunity to create a new order where our differences can be acknowledged and respected but our similarities will be our uniting force. The program coaches children to build a caring classroom as they become able to see their shared humanity—the idea that “what hurts my feelings is likely to hurt your feelings.” The program is based on the idea that if we are able to take the perspective of the Other we will notice and appreciate our commonalities and we will be less likely to allow differences to cause us to marginalize, hate or hurt each other.

### *The Roots of Empathy Year*

When Tomas, whom you met at the beginning of this chapter, visited the classroom, his visit was just one of twenty-seven sessions that make up our program. There are nine themes and each theme revolves around three classroom visits each month led by a trained and certified instructor. The centrepiece of each theme is a visit from the Roots of Empathy family. This visit is preceded by a

preparation session with the instructor, and is followed by another class to discuss the visit and work on activities that reinforce what the children are learning in each theme.

Our curriculum is specialized for four different age groups: kindergarten, Grades 1 to 3, Grades 4 to 6, and Grades 7 to 8. For example, five-year-olds will learn the language of their feelings and be given many opportunities to be involved in physical activities. This part of the program respects the five-year-olds' need to be actively engaged and to speak about their own experiences. Ten-year-olds also learn the language of their feelings, but in addition they learn about the contagion of feelings, and the confusion of having many feelings at the same time. Ten-year-olds revel in understanding the mystery of competing emotions, but five-year-olds would not be able to understand the concepts.

The visits with the baby are naturally greeted with high levels of enthusiasm by the students;<sup>1</sup> however, the rich content of the pre- and post-family-visit classes engages students in discussions and activities related to themes such as emotions, safety and communicating. In the pre-family-visit class the instructor introduces the theme, links it to the stages of baby's development and elicits from the children predictions about what their particular baby will be able to do when she comes to visit. After the visit, the students consolidate what they have learned. This includes group discussions, artwork, drama, journal writing or perhaps a math exercise. In a pre-visit session, for example, the students might practise ways to hold a baby, using a lifelike doll. In a post-visit session, they might discuss their own experiences with childhood fears or their memories of favourite lullabies. The program draws out the generosity of children as the activities in the curriculum invite them to use art, music, drama and song as vehicles for presenting the baby and parent with classroom gifts.

The Roots of Empathy curriculum aligns with the regular school curriculum in many areas of learning. The work the instructor does with the students, particularly in the sessions held before and after the baby visit, touches on social studies, art, science and mathematics. Perhaps the strongest curriculum link of all is the way the program reinforces the school's literacy goals through the many discussions and writing assignments built into each session. The instructor uses well-known children's literature to illustrate emotions such as loneliness and sadness and to underscore themes such as inclusion and bullying. And, without fail, the stories stimulate perspective-taking and open a floodgate to rich discussion and enhanced understanding. During many of the pre- and post-visit sessions, the instructors read aloud the books that have been chosen to prompt deeper discussion around the theme for the month. In some instances, picture books are used even with Grade 7 and 8 students. With students of this age, the focus is on coaching them to take the perspective of the younger children in the stories; instructors are trained to use the theme and drama of the books as jumping-off points for older children to explore the issues that concern them.

Music is an important element, too. The children sing welcome songs and good-bye songs at the beginning and ending of each visit, and take part in action songs (such as "Itsy Bitsy Spider" or "This Little Piggy") as they interact with the baby. Even for older children, any self-consciousness they initially feel about singing a nursery song soon falls away as they get caught up in the baby's energetic reactions to familiar tunes.

The activities that are threaded through the program can be used in many ways, and often, long after the instructor is gone, teachers extend the Roots of Empathy learning experiences into regular classroom plans.

This program is given to the classroom teacher as a gift. The instructor who brings the program into the classroom is also

often a gift—of agencies in the community of the school. These agencies fund the instructional time of the instructors, who are frequently on the staff of the agencies. The extensive training and mentoring provided to instructors by the Roots of Empathy organization is considered by the agencies to be valuable professional development. Classroom teachers have an opportunity to be with their students and observe them in a completely different light during the Roots of Empathy classes. Teachers comment on the emotional development of their students over the course of the year, in particular the kindness they witness, which had not been in evidence before. Many teachers tell us this is their most enjoyable time with the students and that the program positively changes the tone of the classroom.

The students witness the baby grow up in front of their eyes. They become solicitous of this baby and become advocates for all babies. They become part of an authentic dialogue with the Roots of Empathy parent and get insight into the joys and worries of being a parent. In the visits where the family is not present, students explore the connection between the baby's development and their own development; the connections between the baby's feelings and their own feelings. For example, when the baby struggles to sit up without support, and consistently falls over, the children discuss their frustration in baseball games as they try to hit the ball and can't get the bat to connect fast enough. The shared experience of seeing the baby struggle also allows the instructor to draw the analogy with the frustration the children feel when their schoolwork does not come easily. The discussion held in the classroom brings out into the open the negative feelings many children experience silently. The children develop strategies for helping one another, and give themselves permission to struggle openly, and to feel safe and not vulnerable when asking for help. At the end of the school year, as the school plans classes for the following September, teachers are keen to get students who have

had our program because they cooperate and help one another. This anecdotal evidence of an increase in cooperation has been strongly borne out by research on the Roots of Empathy program.

The baby becomes a laboratory for human development—the development of a whole person, physical, social, emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual. Students are coached in learning how to reflect. Every child is encouraged to speak out in the group, to find their voice, and to anchor the feeling of being a contributing member of a group in which there are no wrong answers or stupid questions, and respect is guaranteed.

Although I began the program with kindergarten children, by the end of my first year I was getting requests from teachers to expand into higher grades. There was a strong sense that through the Roots of Empathy program children were developing levels of emotional literacy that not only encouraged a healthy sense of self but contributed to a kinder, more respectful tone in the group. The program was also sought after for Grade 8 classes; in communities where schools were experiencing drop-outs due to adolescent pregnancies, the teachers and principals felt that understanding the emotional and physical needs of babies and the long reach that the first year has in a child's life would be very important for these young students. I reworked the curriculum to address the social and emotional learning that is relevant for this age group. By offering these teens experience with a baby, we help them to understand that every baby is entitled to have parents who can provide her with the best possible life. More than that, we give them a way to reflect on the realities of the upheaval that would result in their own lives if they became parents before they were ready. The concept of giving adolescents realistic insight into parenting, with many opportunities for dialogue with parents “in the trenches” and reflection on the demands of caring for a baby, encourages young people to understand the hardship and long-

lasting implications of teen pregnancy. In one Grade 8 class our parent was a pediatrician. A student asked if it was fun being a parent. The mom replied, “In a twenty-four-hour day, there are fifteen minutes of pure joy and twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes of hard work.”

By involving children in the unfolding story of the parent–child relationship, *Roots of Empathy* is engaging them in a world of social and emotional learning that examines the development of a human being on a green blanket on the classroom floor. This program addresses children’s affective side, their ability to care. Empathy is a key ingredient of competent parenting, and exploration of what it takes to be a responsive and responsible parent opens the door to emotional literacy for children, creating change from the inside out. The skills they learn in the program will not only help them with relationships today but will affect the quality of parenting we can expect in the next generation. These skills will help children develop the empathy, insights and capacity for human connection that are critical for them to take their place in the world.

### *The Birth of Roots of Empathy*

Where did the idea of offering such a program to elementary school children come from? Why was the curriculum built around the concept of bringing a baby into the classroom? What impact for families and society did I envision? The answers to these questions takes me back to my first years as an elementary teacher.

When I took my first teaching job, it was with hope and determination to make a difference in children’s lives. I was so excited about teaching—which was perhaps surprising, since my sister and I used to pray in our early teens to be spared the dreaded fate of a “calling” to be a nun or a teacher. Although as two girls in

convent school we hoped to avoid the vocation, as adults we both chose to teach, my sister moving on to teach children music while I chose kindergarten.

I thought I could make the world perfect for my students. Instead, I found myself face to face with the reality of little children's lives. Seeing those three-, four- and five-year-olds come into the classroom on the first day changed my whole perception. You could tell, right from that initial entrance, which ones were going to be winners, and which ones would struggle. The kind of start they had had in life determined their overall sense of competence and their ability to cope with the stress of transition to school. Some children came into the room with "SUCCESS" stamped on their foreheads. Even the ones who were a little shy, or upset at being separated from their parents, had an air of confidence, of knowing they were valued. They were ready to learn and participate in the group life of the school. As the weeks went by, they demonstrated that readiness in the classroom.

Other children came in warily, or bristling with aggression. Already the experiences of their first few years of life had taught them that their needs didn't matter, that adults couldn't really be trusted, that they'd better keep an eye out for threats all the time. The damage of neglect was as profound as the damage of abuse. Right from their first day of school, these children were swimming upstream. They wore their wounds in their behaviour. Learning was hard for them. Getting along with their classmates was a challenge. The school was not ready for them, but had confirmed the negative messages they'd been given from birth and their lack of school-readiness.

I began to see that if I was to truly make a difference for children, I would need to take a step back. Kindergarten was too late.

One thing all the children had in common was that they all loved their parents and were fiercely loyal to them. This was true whether their home was filled with privilege and harmony or

beset with hardship and conflict. So I called the parents, and said to them, “If you’ll share with me what you know about your children, I’ll share with you what I know about preparing them for success in school.” In all the work I have done with parents and children in the ensuing thirty years, what I had glimpsed darkly as a young teacher has become crystal clear: the relationship between the child and the parent is the most powerful teaching relationship there is. The home has a profound impact on the child’s attitude to learning and their sense of competence before they even start school. Parents are children’s most important teachers. It is the experiences of the early years, mediated by parenting, that set the child on a trajectory for either success or failure. A child’s confidence, her concept of self, her readiness to launch herself into fearless learning and healthy relationships is dependent on and intricately bound up in the quality of nurturing she receives from a loving adult.

Building on these insights, I spent the next twenty-five years working with parents and their preschool children creating and refining programs that sustain and enrich the potential of the parent-child relationship. (The story of the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres which I developed to house these programs is told in Appendix A, see page 229) The programs were based on a premise of respect and empathy for parents and a belief that they want to do their best for their children. Parents were supported in discovering the ways that little children learn: through love and encouragement, emotional connection, authentic conversations and meaningful play. The power of parenting to positively affect children’s success is well documented. The “Early Years Study” prepared for the Ontario government by Dr. Fraser Mustard and the Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain makes a powerful statement about this connection: “It is clear that the early years from conception to age six have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent

learning, behaviour and health. The effects of early experience, particularly during the first three years, on the wiring and sculpting of the brain's billions of neurons, last a lifetime."<sup>2</sup>

While I remain involved in training professionals in the parenting field, I no longer run these programs. I do, however, take every opportunity to visit them and introduce them to others interested in starting up parenting initiatives. The programs remain vibrant, encouraging parents to be their children's teachers and cheerleaders, creating the architecture for lifelong learning.

I like to express the scientific reality behind parenting programs in three words: love grows brains. The three requirements for optimal brain development are good nutrition, good nurturance and good stimulation. A newborn's brain has billions of neurons, but the pathways connecting those neurons are largely undeveloped. It is the experiences that a baby has in the first months and years that will "wire" the brain and prepare him for future learning. It is vital that the baby's needs are met in the context of a healthy and loving parent-child relationship.

### *The First Roots of Empathy Program*

My years of working with young parents, many of them scarcely beyond childhood themselves, led me to wonder if one is ever too young to learn what makes a good parent, to realize what a baby needs to get a good start in life. It was a teen mother who jolted me into the transformative moment that crystallized my thinking about the need to break the intergenerational transmission of violence and negative patterns of parenting. Amy hadn't shown up to the Monday parenting program, so I went to visit her on my way home. She had been beaten yet again by her boyfriend, who had smashed her in the eye resulting in stitches across the eyelid and eyebrow. This boyfriend was also her pimp and was attempting to get her addicted to crack so that she would sell herself more

willingly. She explained that she didn't want to come to the program because the other teen mothers would tell her to leave him, and she said to me, "He's really sorry, he's never going to do it again, and he loves me." This moment was etched in my mind because I could see her little baby girl growing up to repeat the pattern of her mother's life. This young teen had been physically abused by her mother and sexually abused by her mother's various boyfriends. She had received little or no positive nurturing from her alcohol-addicted mother and was now craving affection and attention in any way she could get it, even at the risk of violence to herself and her child. The challenge was to prevent her little daughter from following in her mother's footsteps; the challenge was to find a way out of repeating the cycle of addiction, violence, low literacy and poor parenting that was being passed on from one generation to the next.

Just as empathy lay at the heart of the parenting programs, it was also clearly the foundation of a program that could reach children and offer them not just a window on nurturing, responsive parenting, but an entire spectrum of social and emotional learning. It was clear to me that there was not enough room in the school curriculum to give these essential aspects of empathic human development the attention they deserved. More than that, I daily witnessed how learning was compromised as children's energies were depleted through the challenges of becoming part of the social group in the classroom or through coping with social aggression in the schoolyard. I visualized an approach that would strengthen the ability of children to build a solid sense of self-worth and caring relationships with others, a concrete program that would help them create an image of themselves as people who could make a difference in the world.

In 1996, Maytree Foundation<sup>3</sup> funded the conceptual development and implementation of a pilot Roots of Empathy program. The pilot was launched in kindergarten classrooms. An enthusiastic

principal and a nucleus of compassionate teachers, familiar with the successes being experienced by children and parents in the parenting programs, opened their doors and worked with me through the evolution of the first year. There was a clear logic to parenting programs for parents—they have an immediate need and a strong interest in interacting with and learning about their children’s development. But what were the features about learning to be a parent that would catch the imagination of children and enrich their experience of the world? For them, the years when they would be responsible for a baby seemed far away. What would make it real for them? In the original parenting programs, the learning for preschoolers was solidly experiential—activities were designed to allow them to see and touch and feel, to connect the concrete with the concept. As I started to apply the principles of experience-based learning to building concepts of responsive parenting in programs for school-aged children, it was clear that the concrete “learning tools” had to be the relationship between a parent and baby. I engaged and trained the people I knew to be the most knowledgeable about and committed to the value of the parent–child relationship. They were the parenting workers I had worked with for many years and they stood with me through the first year as I built, lesson by lesson, the themes that became the Roots of Empathy program.

Once I had the idea to bring a real baby and parent into the classroom, giving children the opportunity to observe the baby’s development and the interaction between the baby and the parents over a school year, I could see the enormous scope for revealing how this relationship becomes the venue for developing social and emotional competence. Thinking through the dynamics of interaction in such a program, I realized that the learning would flow from the baby, that the baby would be the teacher. Over the years, I had witnessed countless times the impact a baby makes on

the people around him. In the realms of emotional response and trust, a baby has no “agenda.” He comes predisposed to love and expect the best from everyone in his sphere; he has no inhibitions or wiles to disguise how he is feeling and what he needs. He is a pure representation of what it is to be human and how to interact empathically with other humans. He is where the roots of empathy begin. In the early parenting programs that were part of the public school system in Toronto, we often had visits from older children in the regular classrooms who were having a rough day or acting out in class. They were permitted to visit us because it had a calming effect for them. The calming effect was the baby. There were always babies in the centre to create a flow of warmth and receptivity for each child—the frustrations and chaos of feelings that were too prickly to address head-on could be talked about through interacting with the baby.

Roots of Empathy is a program with many layers. It offers an experiential insight into competent parenting: understanding how a baby communicates, learning issues of infant safety and infant development. But it takes the learning that occurs with the baby in the classroom and builds it into a broader exploration of how humans understand and value themselves and each other. This vision was born of my conviction that babies were the perfect way to explore all that is valuable in the human experience, all that is critical in building healthy relationships, all that is indispensable in creating strong communities and a civil society. This program could teach a literacy of feeling. Through observation of the baby’s emotions, children could learn about their own emotions and the emotions of others, learn to take the perspective of another, understand the power for resolving conflict that lies in being able to see a situation and the world from another person’s viewpoint. I was convinced that the transformative potential of such a program was enormous. I had no doubt that it had the

power to increase the emotional competence, the collaborative skills and the parenting capacity of a whole generation, child by child, classroom by classroom, community by community.

Many initiatives have been tried in schools to give children exposure to the role of being a parent. Children are given a plastic doll to care for, or eggs that they have to carry with them and look after. The aim of such programs is to recreate or imitate aspects of the parenting experience. What Roots of Empathy does is give children the experience *directly*, including interaction with a real baby in that baby's first year of life. Our program goes deeper still—as I cannot say too often—in that it fosters the development of empathy in the students, and this is a core component of successful parenting.

All babies are powerful teachers. One of our instructors said that her first meeting with the Grade 7/8 class to which she was assigned was very intimidating and the class was quite unruly. She was nervous about the family visit, especially because one of the boys, who was coping with behavioural challenges, had said he would tell the baby that he was ugly and stupid. As soon as the mother and baby walked through the door, though, the students were mesmerized and participated positively and enthusiastically. In fact, the boy who had spoken so negatively at the earlier session was, at the end of the class, the first one to head over to the baby and ask if he could hold him. And the mother who brought her baby to that first class could hardly wait to come back the following month to show how he had grown and the new skills he had learned.

### *Choosing a Roots of Empathy Baby*

When we work with a community interested in bringing a Roots of Empathy program to their local school, those included in the planning are not just school board staff and parents; public health

nurses, youth workers or volunteers from local service organizations often play a role. These are the people who are involved in and know the community; they know which family has just welcomed a new arrival. Our advice on recruiting a Roots of Empathy family is geared towards ensuring the richest experience for the students. This means finding parents who are enthusiastic about what Roots of Empathy offers to children, are willing to share with them the important first year of their baby's life, and can commit to a regular schedule of classroom visits. We look for families who live in the school neighbourhood, and who represent its diversity. We are not looking for "super babies" or "Gucci moms." Borrowing from Bruno Bettelheim, I say, "We are looking for the 'good-enough parent.'"<sup>4</sup>

Roots of Empathy babies are between two and four months old at the beginning of the program. Bringing the baby into the classroom as early in his life as possible allows for a greater range of infant development stages over the year and optimizes the learning opportunities for the students. Our emphasis on bringing a baby from the school's neighbourhood has the added benefit of connecting a new family with the school. This helps to strengthen the sense of community between families and schools and also makes it more likely that the Roots of Empathy family reflects the cultural makeup of the school. When babies are from one of a number of a school's cultural groups, the good feelings and connections that develop between the children and "their" baby inevitably spill over into a stronger sense of inclusiveness within the community. We encourage families where the father can come for visits as well as, or instead of, the mother; this can provide a sorely needed perspective in classrooms where children have little or no experience with a male in a nurturing role. We have had single parent families both mother-led and, occasionally, father-led.

In one of our kindergarten classes, baby Tama visited each month with his mother, and on a number of occasions his father

was able to join them. Their reflections on the experience reveal the exchange of learning that occurred. Tama's mother, Theresa, who is of Maori heritage, sang Maori lullabies in the classroom and was impressed with the intense involvement of children who were five years old. She commented that "The children were genuinely interested in what Tama could or could not achieve so it was very easy to answer their questions. We were surprised at the maturity the children displayed and the words they became used to using—like *temperament*, *transition*, *milestones* and *communication*. Some of the children found the words difficult to say but they clearly understood what they meant." Tama's parents, as so many parents in our program do, commented on how much the interactions in the classroom taught them about children.

### *Branching Out*

Roots of Empathy has grown exponentially. It is offered in schools across Canada and Australia. We have reached almost 29,000 students so far in 2005. The news spreads from community to community—by word of mouth, through media coverage and through educators sharing best practices. When a community hears there's a school-based program out there that involves a local family, makes a positive difference in how children treat each other today and prepares them to be good citizens and good parents in the future, Roots of Empathy is invited in. Members of our staff then collaborate with the community to build a committed group of people who champion the program, choose potential instructors and work with the schools to get the program up and running.

Globalization has made the world a much smaller place and heightened the commonality of the issues we struggle with. We are plagued with conflict and violence in schools. Our program offers practical hope. We are at a time and a place where a new way

forward is sorely needed. Through the eyes of a baby, *Roots of Empathy* takes us back to the basics of what it is to be truly human.

### *Roots of Empathy in Our World*

I invite every parent, every educator, every individual concerned with shaping the next generation to examine the learnings culled from the parent–baby relationship. The chapters in this book are presented to you as windows into the world of *Roots of Empathy*. They are designed to reveal to you the layers of learning experienced by children in the classroom and reveal the wisdom of children’s responses to those experiences.

Parents will draw from *Roots of Empathy* an affirmation of the fundamental influence they have on their children from the first breath and even in utero. The dance of intimacy, conducted through glances, smiles, rocking and soothing words gives infants a secure base from which to successfully engage the world—from forming healthy relationships to exploring their physical space, tackling problems and learning how to learn. In the holistic environment of this program, we name, describe and give life to concepts in neuroscience and child development. Parents will recognize in these lessons that what they do instinctively is critical to raising a generation of children who have the skills and emotional competence to create a more civil society. Through *Roots of Empathy*, we can break the cycle of passing on damaging behaviours, whether these be violent or neglectful or unempathic, from one generation to the next.

Educators—teachers, school administrators—in many, many school settings across Canada have witnessed what this program adds to the dynamics of the classroom, to the life of the school and to the learning of individual children. By witnessing the development of a baby over the course of a year in the context of the parenting relationship, the program ensures a solid foundation

in social and emotional learning. Communication skills, through discussion, art, writing and music, are an important component of every class we offer. An elementary school vice-principal told me, “I get so excited about all of the curriculum connections—I know if I were the classroom teacher with this opportunity, my whole program would revolve around Roots of Empathy.” An additional compelling feature of having this program in schools is the strong body of evidence that links the development of empathic skills with academic success. When empathy training is integrated into the classroom, critical thinking skills, reading comprehension and creative thinking are enhanced.<sup>5</sup>

Many observers and participants who have witnessed the unfolding of Roots of Empathy in a classroom over the course of a year have suggested that it is nothing short of revolutionary in its potential to change the way young people see themselves and their world. Change-makers directly involved in social policy development, whose vocation it is to find ways to address the ills that plague our society, be it domestic abuse, child abuse, bullying in schools, the devastating effects of FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) or youth violence, will find support in this program. Every tenet of the program is aimed at inculcating respect for oneself, understanding and compassion for others, and a sense of responsibility for the world, its citizens and its future. In this respect, it is a powerful preventative program aimed at addressing those very ills that policy-makers are concerned with. Key longitudinal studies done in the United States show that the cost of prevention in children’s early years is a fraction of the cost of responding to the needs of individuals when they fall off the rails and become involved with social services and the judicial system.<sup>6</sup> Justice Edward Ormston, a criminal court judge, once told me, “If the lessons that children learn in Roots of Empathy could have been taught to the people I deal with every day, we’d have far less need for prisons.” Justice Ormston is now a member of our board.

The way we treat and care for children has an indelible impact on our school system, our economy and our future. We cannot afford to underestimate the critical role of empathy in moral development and our motivation for justice.<sup>7</sup> Nor can we afford to underestimate the importance of the early years and the family in building the kind of world where full participation of every citizen is a given, where we breathe peace and social justice and where empathy is in the water supply. *Roots of Empathy* shows how an infant can lead the way.