

What About The Children?

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'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society'

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Summary of Goodman Lecture, 2019

Dr Mary Gordon

Founder and President of the Roots of Empathy programme

Seeding empathy in young children to build an empathetic world

Gordon started her talk by explaining that the Roots of Empathy programme grew from her experience of working with troubled parents and children, when she realised that the lack of empathy was a major problem. The roots of empathy lie in babyhood and grow from the attachment relationship between a baby and his or her mother (or other main carer) during the first year. Empathy, however, can be learned – it is ‘caught, rather than taught’ – and this is easiest in childhood. The aim of the Roots of Empathy programme is to foster the development of empathy in primary-school age children, preparing them to become responsible parents and citizens. The programme involves bringing a parent and infant into a class of young children at regular intervals during a single school year, accompanied by a trained instructor. The children follow ‘their’ baby’s development from a few months old to about a year; they are encouraged to observe the attachment relationship between parent and infant and to ‘fall in love with’ the baby: something that it is very easy to do, as babies are built to be adorable. Interestingly, children in care are often particularly prone to fall in love with the parent, too, as they learn perhaps for the first time what parental love looks like.

Dr Gordon reported that the children in the programme readily come to understand that a baby is a complete human being with emotions. They begin to learn to pick up these emotions from observation and, through this, it is expected that they will learn to understand their and others’ feelings better. Gordon explained that parents who mistreat young children often fail to appreciate that these infants have the same emotions as older children and adults, so developing this understanding can help to break cycles of violence and poor parenting. There is an emphasis not only on attachment but on attunement, when the parent ‘tunes in’ to what the baby is feeling.

Learning how to read and understand others’ feelings is an important part of emotional literacy. Children – and adults – who are emotionally illiterate also find it difficult to understand and communicate their own emotions. In a Roots of Empathy class, children are encouraged to look at their baby through the lens of temperament: is s/he intense, easy to arouse, adventurous or more placid? Through this, they are encouraged to understand their own temperaments: there are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ ones, they are all different.

Dr Gordon then showed a video clip of one Roots of Empathy class in a primary school in her home city of Toronto. In this case, very few of the children had been born in Canada and some had only recently arrived and were still learning English. She asked her audience to note that the instructor frequently asked the children questions, and that these were all about

what they were observing; they were no factual questions with obvious right answers. She was interested in what the children were thinking or feeling, not what they knew. The baby in this clip was a rather serious-looking little girl called May who was old enough to sit up, and the video showed her reaching for a toy and toppling over twice. The second time she fell she hit her chin and immediately looked for her mother, who reassured her. In watching this, the children – who were all attentive throughout – could see the vulnerability of baby May and her securely attached relationship with her mother.

She explained that the programme is non-judgemental and that particularly ‘clever’ or ‘good’ (or, indeed, ‘bad’) children are in no way singled out. A child who is seventh or eighth to volunteer an answer is just as likely to be chosen as the one who responded first. There is no evaluation of individual children and no prizes, following the principle that childhood should be ‘a feast, not a race’. Each visit from the parent and infant is both preceded and followed by a session with the instructor alone. It is in these sessions that children who have been abused or neglected, or who have other serious issues, sometimes ‘open up’ to the instructor or their teacher.

She reported that teachers very frequently observe a change for the better in their pupils’ behaviour during and after the Roots of Empathy programme; levels of bullying go down, and social confidence and pro-social behaviour go up. There is not only anecdotal evidence for this; several longitudinal studies have been published in the peer-reviewed literature. Gordon quoted from the most recent of these, by David Latsch of Berne University in Switzerland. His group compared 13 classes of children in Zurich that took part in Roots of Empathy with a control group of 10 similar classes that did not. All children were tested three times: once at the beginning of the school year when the programme was held, then at the end of the year and finally another year afterwards. On average, the children who took the programme increased in empathy during that year, and the effect remained a further year on; there was no change in the control groups. Aggressive behaviour decreased during the programme but increased slightly in the control groups during that year; this difference, too, remained after a further year.

Dr Gordon also discussed the findings from evaluations of the programme by both children and their classroom teachers. A very large majority of children reported learning that babies have feelings and that they could recognise these feelings. An equally large majority of teachers reported that the pupils talked about their feelings more. Almost all the children stated that they would help a classmate they saw being bullied, although slightly fewer would do the same for a child they didn’t know. One particularly interesting – and positive – finding was the teachers’ observation that the programme saved them time for teaching, as the children were better able to resolve conflicts between themselves. She also quoted some responses from UK children who had taken the programme, including this, from a child in Year 3 (7-8 years old): ‘Roots of Empathy helped us to be better friends and better people’.

Another important feature of the programme is the use of simple brochures to help children learn about how to treat babies safely. Gordon and her colleagues have written a range of brochures, some of which are shared with children in the programme. Children from 8-10 years old, for example, are given a brochure that explains why it is dangerous to shake a baby. They learn that a crying baby is not a bad baby but a baby with a problem, and, perhaps similarly, that parents who engage in risky behaviours are not necessarily bad, but, rather, desperate and ignorant of the baby’s needs. There are also brochures in the series about the dangers of second-hand smoke and of drinking alcohol during pregnancy and about the safe way to put a baby to sleep (the ‘Back to Sleep’ programme). Children learn to advocate for the welfare of the babies they meet and their much-younger siblings, even those yet to be born; the brochures help them to feel responsible but not overwhelmed.

Finally, Dr Gordon described an incident that illustrated a few of the most important teaching points of the programme. Early on, before the baby had had a chance to really get to know the instructor, she asked the baby if she could pick him up, and of course there was no response. Eventually, one child pointed out that he couldn't talk yet, and the instructor asked the children to watch him communicate with noises and body language. When the mother asked the baby the same question his body language was much more enthusiastic, so the children had learned to read body language as well as to notice the attachment relationship. The lecture ended, appropriately, with a touching scene from baby May's final session with her Roots of Empathy class: the nearly-year-old girl had bonded with all the children in the classroom and even, in keeping with her Japanese heritage, made a little bow to say farewell to each.