

Roots of Empathy returns to Atikokan

Putting baby's superpower to good use

M. McKinnon

First offered here in 2005, Roots of Empathy focuses on developing empathy in children. The award-winning, evidence-based mental health and wellbeing program is designed for elementary students from Kindergarten to grade eight and has been proven to reduce aggression, including bullying, and promote children's social and emotional competence.

Founded by Mary Gordon, the program has become an international charity with the ultimate goal of working towards a world that is more caring, peaceful, and civil.

The core of the program involves introducing a baby to young children. Children are then coached by a trained Roots of Empathy instructor to read the baby's emotional cues, take the baby's perspective, and witness the parent-baby attachment relationship. Children learn to identify the baby's feelings, reflect on and understand their own feelings, and then bridge to understand the feelings of others.

“We know that babies love people regardless of how they behave. Their superpower is that they can make you love them,” says Gordon. “With the help of an instructor, children observe the most powerful relationship in the lifespan. The children spend time every month with that baby from the time that baby is two months old right to the end of school.”

“They study that baby. They learn about what the baby is feeling.”



Baby Briggs Anderson with Roots of Empathy instructor
Rebecca Gushulak
of Child & Family Services
(CFS PHOTO)

“The children fall in love with the baby and they learn a lot about love from the baby, and they learn about all their feelings. And then they learn how to have those same feelings for other people.”

With the instructor's help, the children come to understand how their behaviour and words can hurt others. That enables them to build positive relations, which improves their mental health and well-being. The baby is the 'teacher' for children to learn that we share the same feelings and our feelings are at the core of our humanity.

Kenora-Rainy River Districts Child & Family Services provides Roots of Empathy through its child development program. Infant and child development workers teach the program in schools in Rainy River and Fort Frances, as well as Atikokan. The instructor here is Rebecca Gushulak, who has been teaching Roots of Empathy in local schools since 2009. She has taught at all curriculum levels, from Kindergarten to grade eight.

This year she is teaching the program to the Kindergarten class at St. Patrick's School, with Roots of Empathy baby Briggs, son of Chelsea and Jesse Anderson.

“If we want [our children] to grow up to be healthy, to be mentally well, to be empathic, we need to start today, because they will change the world,” says Gordon.



Baby Briggs spending time in the St. Pat's Kindergarten class with Kinsley Zygmunt, Oaklyn Anderson (his big sister) and Roots of Empathy instructor Rebecca Gushulak