

## Roots of Empathy Program for Schools

Note: 90by30 (Lane County initiative to reduce child abuse and neglect), has recently begun implementing Roots of Empathy in Lane County as one of the flagship strategies of their initiative. At the end of August, Roots of Empathy staff led a three-day Roots of Empathy training in Eugene and the program is being launched this fall in 20 rural classrooms. In addition, 29 teachers, principals, and school counselors attended an information session about incorporating ROE into their schools.

[www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)

**Grades and setting:** Kindergarten to grade 8, with a separate curriculum for kindergarten, grades 1-3, grades 4-6, and grades 7-8. (Another program, called Seeds of Empathy, is designed for early childhood settings.) Roots of Empathy is delivered in school classrooms during regular school hours.

**Summary:** Roots of Empathy is an international, evidence-based classroom program that has been shown to reduce levels of aggression among children by raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy. The focus of Roots of Empathy in the long term is to build capacity of the next generation for responsible citizenship and responsive parenting. In the short term, Roots of Empathy focuses on raising levels of empathy, resulting in more respectful and caring relationships and reduced levels of bullying and aggression. At the heart of the program are a neighbourhood infant and parent who visit the classroom every three weeks over the school year. A trained Roots of Empathy Instructor coaches students to observe the baby's development and to label the baby's feelings, as well as to identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others. This "emotional literacy" taught in the program lays the foundation for safer and more caring classrooms. When children are more competent in understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others (empathy), they are less likely to physically, psychologically and emotionally hurt each other through bullying and other cruelties. In the Roots of Empathy program children learn how to challenge cruelty and injustice. Messages of social inclusion and activities that are consensus building contribute to a culture of caring that changes the tone of the classroom. The Instructor also visits before and after each family visit to prepare and reinforce teachings using a specialized lesson plan for each visit.

The curriculum is comprehensive and attuned to the development and interests of the children. The 639-page curriculum is divided into nine themes, with three classroom visits supporting each theme (a pre-family visit, family visit and post-family visit) for a total of 27 visits. Each of the nine themes is further broken down into four age ranges:

- Kindergarten
- Primary (Grades 1-3)
- Junior (Grades 4-6)
- Senior (Grades 7-8)

The Roots of Empathy curriculum addresses the affective side of education, but the activities have many links to the classroom curriculum. For example, students use math skills when they calculate and chart the baby's weight and measurements. Literature is used as a way to open the door to feelings and perspective taking. The discussion and reflection that follows builds solidarity and empathy. Art and music play a role in helping children to express their feelings.

**Effectiveness/Outcomes:** Since 2000, the Roots of Empathy program has been evaluated through independent research conducted in numerous countries across three continents.

Key research findings show that children who participate in Roots of Empathy perceive a more positive classroom environment by the end of the program (e.g. increased sense of classroom belonging and peer acceptance). They also exhibit:

- An increase in sharing, helping and including (examples of prosocial behaviors)
- A decrease in aggression. For example, applied to all the children that will participate in Roots of Empathy, on average it is expected that the program will reduce the number of children fighting by approximately 50% [1]. This is particularly significant given that children in the comparison classrooms show increases in aggression across the school year
- An increase in social and emotional understanding
- An increase in knowledge of parenting
- An increase in empathy

Longitudinal studies have shown lasting results.

**Cost:** Costs vary with the unique elements of the program location. Program costs include training of local instructors plus ongoing support, mentoring and instructor certification expenses as well as learning materials. The curriculum is leased to instructors for as long as they deliver the program and must be returned when the instructor stops teaching. It is made available as part of the instructor training process.

**Contact information and useful links for the program:**

Lane County 90by30 initiative: <http://90by30.com/what-we-do/roots-empathy>

Instructors were recently trained in Lane County: <http://rootsofempathy.org/oregon/>.

There do not appear to be any other counties in Oregon that have implemented, or are implementing, this program.