

Babies help pupils learn empathy

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A class of Grade 4 students at George Webster Elementary watch eight-month-old Patrick, who sits on a green blanket in the middle of their circle.

His tiny white shirt says “teacher” and it’s no joke.

Patrick is a teacher with Roots of Empathy, which began in Toronto in 1996, and pairs volunteer parents and their young children with classrooms. It’s more than a preventive bullying program, according to founder Mary Gordon. Through learning about a baby, elementary school students become more empathetic, reducing bullying and aggression, she says.

Last year, more than 700 Ontario classes participated in the program. It is among the anti-bullying programs that have the attention of Minister of Education Laurel Broten, who has proposed tougher legislation that would call for all school boards to develop bullying prevention policies.

The program is in every province and other countries including the United States, Britain and New Zealand.

When Patrick arrives in the classroom, the students and teacher sing a welcome song to him, and he is taken around the circle to make eye contact with each student.

A Roots of Empathy instructor talks to the class about how Patrick has developed since they saw him three weeks earlier, his reaction when his mom leaves him and how his face shows his emotions as the class plays with him. Patrick visits the class nine times in total, and there are pre- and post-visits from the instructor, sans baby.

“We’re not targeting, naming, shaming or blaming any of the children. No one is identified as the bully or the victim,” Ms. Gordon says. “The bystanders, the onlookers, all children everywhere have the capacity to understand, through the development of empathy, that they have the ability to hurt somebody or help somebody.”

Ms. Gordon, a Member of the Order of Canada, says the visits can go as far as changing structure and function of the brain. Several studies attest to a decrease in aggression and an increase in positive social behaviour.

Many of the nine-year-olds are enthralled by the baby. “I learned that really, baby Patrick... he’ll give you a lot of love and care if you give love and care back,” says Elieah Robertson.

Towards the end of Patrick’s visit, the instructor briefly mentions bullying directly, suggesting where students can go for help.

“Part of our job is to ask for help,” she tells them. “And you can also help your friends.”



Nine-year-old Joyce Garsain helps eight-month-old Patrick Duffy as a grade four class looks on at George Webster Elementary school in Toronto. Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom program that has shown dramatic effect in reducing levels of aggression among schoolchildren.

Deborah Baic /The Globe and Mail