

The beer, dubbed Tactical Nuclear Penguin, is freeze-distilled at an ice cream factory

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EDUCATION

Kindness 101. An antibullying program teaches kids to empathize by bringing a mother and baby into the classroom

BY MAIA SZALAVITZ

AT A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN TORONTO, 25 THIRD- and fourth-graders circle a green blanket and focus intently on a 10-month-old baby with serious brown eyes. Baby Stephana, as they call her, crawls toward the center of the blanket, then turns to glance at her mother. "When she looks back to her mom, we know she's checking in to see if everything's cool," explains one boy,

who is learning how to understand and respond to the emotions of the baby—and to those of his classmates—in a program called Roots of Empathy (ROE).

After the recent bullying-related suicide of a 15-year-old in Massachusetts, parents and educators around North America are wondering: Could her death have been prevented? What can schools do to stop the taunting that takes place on and off campus? And most important,

Baby steps In Toronto, children learn how to understand an infant's cues and frustrations

can positive qualities like empathy and kindness be taught? In December, the Campbell Collaboration, an international research network, published an examination of decades of data from the bewildering array of school antibullying programs (with names like Expect Respect, Youth Matters and S.S.GRIN) and found that the

Photograph by Finn O'Hara for TIME



Empathizer Gordon, seated on desk, is the founder of Roots of Empathy

ones that work best have many different elements—including engaging and training parents—and last the longest, sometimes for years.

One of the most promising antibullying programs, ROE (along with its sister program, Seeds of Empathy) starts as early as preschool and brings a loving parent and a baby to classrooms to help children learn to understand the perspective of others. The nonprofit program is based in part on social neuroscience, a field that has exploded in the past 10 years, with hundreds of new findings on how our brains are built to care, compete and cooperate. Once a month, students watch the same mom and baby interact on the blanket. Special ROE instructors also hold related classes and discussions before and after these visits throughout the course of the school year.

“We love when we get a colicky baby,” says founder Mary Gordon. Then the mother will usually tell the class how frustrating and annoying it is when she can’t figure out what to do to get the baby to stop crying. That gives children insight into the parent’s perspective—and into how children’s behavior can affect adults, often something they have never thought about.

When Baby Stephana cries, an ROE instructor helps students consider what might be bothering her. They are taught that a crying baby isn’t a bad baby but a baby with a problem. By trying to figure out how to help, they learn to see the world through the infant’s eyes and understand what it is like to have needs but no ability to express them clearly.

Founded in 1996 in Canada, ROE has taught 315,000 children in four countries.

It reached 50,000 children in some 2,000 classrooms this academic year. To date, nine independent studies have shown that ROE schools experience “reduced aggression” and “increased prosocial behavior” among students. (ROE’s use of these terms is probably the reason it was not evaluated in the Campbell study, which used a keyword search for studies on “bullying.”) In the U.S., where momentum is starting to build for a congressional bill that would create federal grants for social and emotional learning in elementary and secondary schools, ROE is currently used in 40 schools, and Seeds of Empathy is in three Head Start centers in Seattle, with expansion planned next year.

“When kids are able to watch an interaction that’s empathic, empathy isn’t just being taught; it’s being demonstrated,” says Dr. Daniel Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA. ROE is unique, he notes, because it “combines the direct observation of babies and their mothers, weekly time devoted to talking about the internal world of mind and watching a baby grow up over time.” Among the program’s many big-name fans: the Dalai Lama, who has twice appeared publicly with Gordon and thinks ROE can help spur world peace.

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Although human nature has historically been seen as fundamentally selfish, social neuroscience suggests otherwise. Researchers are finding that empathy is innate in most humans, as well as in some other species. Chimps, for instance, will protest unfair treatment of others, refusing to accept a treat they have rightfully earned if another chimp doing the same work fails to get the same reward.

The first stirrings of human empathy typically appear in babyhood: newborns cry upon hearing another infant’s cry, and studies have shown that children as young as 14 months offer unsolicited help to adults who appear to be struggling to reach something. Babies also show a distinct preference for adults who help rather than hinder others.

But like language acquisition, the inherent capacity to empathize can be profoundly affected by early experience. The first five years of life are now known to be a critical time for emotional as well as linguistic development. Although children can be astonishingly resilient, studies show that those who experience early abuse or neglect are at much greater risk of becoming aggressive or even psychopathic, bullying other children or being bullied themselves.

That helps explain why simply punishing bullies doesn’t work. Most already know what it’s like to be victimized. Instead of identifying with the victims, some kids learn to use violence to express anger or assert power.

After a child has hurt someone, “we always think we should start with ‘How do you think so-and-so felt?’” Gordon says. “But you will be more successful if you start with ‘You must have felt very upset.’” The trick, she says, is to “help children describe how they felt, so that the next time this happens, they’ve got language. Now they can say, ‘I’m feeling like I did when I bit Johnny.’”

When children are able to understand their own feelings, they are closer to being able to understand that Johnny was also hurt and upset by being bitten. Empathy is based on our ability to mirror others’ emotions, and ROE helps children recognize and describe what they’re seeing.

Observing infants is simple and effective. Their helplessness and cuteness evoke a powerful protective response—quite different from what happens when bullies sense vulnerability. “Babies are exquisite teachers of empathy because they are theaters of emotion,” says Gordon. “They don’t hide anything.” If only adolescents were so easy to read. ■

Szalavitz is a co-author of Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential—and Endangered (Morrow, 2010)