

## ROOTS OF EMPATHY PARENTS AND BABIES

Last year, seven parents made a commitment – not just of themselves, but of their newborn babies. The commitment was to spend the time to share their babies' development with entire classrooms of children. Today, they are half way through the 10-month program and all are still smiling.



Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based program that has shown dramatic effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children while improving the kids' ability to understand their own feelings and the feelings of others (empathy). At the heart of the program are the baby and parent who visit the classroom nine times over the school year. Parents talk about how it feels to be a parent and about how their baby is growing and learning. Each parent and baby is supported by a Roots facilitator who visits the class before and after each family visit to prepare the kids and reinforce what is being taught.

Each of the nine visits has a lesson plan and centers around a theme: Meeting the Baby, Crying, Caring and Planning, Emotions, Sleep, Safety, Communicating, Who Am I?, and Goodbye and Good Wishes.

Although Revelstoke is a small community, the Roots program has grown through a partnership between the Early Childhood Development Committee, the Child Care Society, Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy and the Board of Education. Facilitators receive an honorarium but for the parents and babies, it's all volunteer.

Kathy Bracken heard about the program last year and wanted to get involved. "I wanted to share my baby!" Kathy and baby Brody (now 4 months old) visit the Kindergarten class at Mt. View Elementary. She finds that even after 3 visits, the children have visibly relaxed around baby Brody and seem much more calm in general. Kathy is impressed with the kindness the children show toward Brody.

For Tammy Tomm, who is a teacher herself and visits the Mt. View grade 7 class, it has been a way to stay connected with the kids at school. "It's been really neat because the kids all shared my pregnancy and now they are sharing my baby. The kids are so excited and involved with Rory (4 1/2 months)." Tammy was particularly surprised at how responsive the boys in the class have been – something she didn't expect.

Karen and Mikko Jaakola heard about the program through the public health nurse – they, and baby Kiira (6 months), visit the Mt. View Grade 1/2 split class. "The kids get so excited! The other day Kiira rolled over and everyone cheered and clapped! But then they hushed themselves, 'we don't want to scare the baby!' We've really enjoyed watching the kids in the class change and grow too!"

Monica Degerness, who is a preschool teacher at Jumping Jacks, was also thrilled to share both her pregnancy and baby Parker (8 months) with the children who are now in the Kindergarten class at Mt. Begbie Elementary, where she and Parker visit. "You get to celebrate every one of your baby's milestones with a group of kids – each milestone becomes a teaching experience. And for me, the anti-bullying results are really important." Monica and Parker also participate in the Seeds of Empathy program, which is the 'little sister' program to Roots and is offered at Jumping Jacks Preschool.

Natalia Sessa and baby Tanner (7 months) visit the grade 1/2 class at Columbia Park. "My older kids have been in the program and have loved it so much. I wanted to be on the giving end and share Tanner with the kids. It's neat because even though we're just in one class, other children are drawn in because pictures are posted on the bulletin board. I feel like my baby is a celebrity – we meet kids downtown and they always come up and ask how he's doing, smile, and interact with Tanner."

Jean Bruder heard about the program when her friends' children were talking about it. Jean and baby Aiden (6 months) visit the K/1 class at Columbia Park. "I really like spending time with the kids. At first, some were shy but now they are really involved." She finds the kids go home and talk about the program with their families and so the impact spreads out beyond just the classroom visits.

Melanie Jenson heard about Roots at the Employment Centre. Melanie, partner Norm Winters, and baby Leif (6 months) visit the 2/3 class at Mt. Begbie Elementary. "I've learned so much about my baby's development – more than what you get just from a book. It has been so meaningful – the kids seem to become more natural, more themselves, during the visits."

For all the parents, it's been an incredibly rewarding experience so far. And although the babies are definitely tired after each session, they are starting to recognize what's going to happen and get excited when they are nearing the school. Monica holds baby Parker up in the air, "I hope my baby is in a Roots class when he gets older!"

For more information on the Roots of Empathy program, contact Linda Chell, Key Point Person, or Tracy Spannier, Mentor, at 250-837-6669. For more information about volunteering in Revelstoke, contact the Community Centre at 250-837-9351 or visit [www.revelstokecf.com/volunteers](http://www.revelstokecf.com/volunteers)

*Submitted by Jill Zacharias, Photo courtesy of Cathy Burke, CFDC Volunteer Committee members*