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Tiny teachers

Children learn to be caring citizens through Roots of Empathy program

by NORM BLASEG

“Hello baby Joseph!” is the enthusiastic warm welcome students at Redwood Acres Public School give six-month-old Joseph Boggs-Corboy, who is one of several tiny teachers in the Rainbow District School Board Roots of Empathy program.

Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom program that has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children while raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy.

Roots of Empathy develops emotional literacy; reduces levels of bullying, aggression and violence; increases knowledge of human development, learning and infant safety; increases pro-social behavior; and prepares students for responsible citizenship and responsive parenting.

In Rainbow schools, babies visit kindergarten classrooms with their parents/guardians.

This is Joseph’s fourth visit to Redwood Acres. His bright blue eyes fill with excitement as he is greeted by the smiling faces of the children who have adopted him for the school year.

“Joseph truly enjoys being part of the program,” says mom Christina Boggs. “He is thrilled to interact with the children. It’s a great learning experience for everyone.”

During Joseph’s classroom visits, students say hello, goodbye and send him well wishes. They watch him communicate

with his mom and with each other. They monitor his facial cues for feelings and emotions. They talk to him, sing him songs, and watch him play.

As the children observe the parent/infant interaction and follow the baby’s development, they learn how infants grow and develop. They also learn empathetic responses to the baby’s temperament.

“It’s funny when he puts toys in his mouth,” says student Gwendolyn Dashnay. “I like how he giggles because then it makes me giggle.”

Her classmate Jenna McKee adds, “I like taking pictures with him and singing songs to him.”

“As students develop empathy, they come to appreciate each person’s individuality,” says Lesleigh Dye, superintendent of schools for the Rainbow board. “Students gain a sense of respect and learn other meaningful values that will help them become compassionate and caring members of society.”

She adds, “Roots of Empathy has proven to be an effective way of developing positive student behaviour. Character development is an essential focus of everyday learning and life in Rainbow schools.”

Empathy is among the 10 character traits adopted by Rainbow board, along with honesty, respect, responsibility, integrity, courtesy, resilience, acceptance, courage and co-operation. These character traits, being modeled, taught and expected in Rainbow schools, provide the foundation for ongoing character development.

Norm Blaseg is the director of education for the Rainbow District School Board.