

ROOTS from page 1A

“The job of 90by30 is to select preventative strategies,” she said. Ideally, “If communities have certain preventative programs available to people in the community, then those supports will reduce child abuse and neglect.”

The organization has implemented other projects this year, such as the Welcome Baby Box program; however, “We don’t have anything for the younger children,” Mann-Heintz lamented. “So that’s the focus of this, to start instilling the understanding of emotions — being able to label emotions, being able to identify emotions by what people’s body gestures and facial features are, and translating how they feel to you.”

Mapleton School District, as well, falls within 90by30’s West Lane district and began its own sessions in October with a first- and second-grade class combination. Another visit will take place later this month.

How the roots are planted

The Roots of Empathy program is a nine-month curriculum with a total of 27 classroom visits, nine of which are infant visits. Instructors also visit the class the weeks before and after each session with the infant.

In the week preceding the visit from the family, instructors drop by the classroom to introduce what the theme of the sessions

will be that month and discuss what developments the children expect to see in the baby. Instructors visit again a week after the baby’s visit to discuss the experience with students and work on art and writing projects concerning the themes of the month.

While these pre- and post-visits are an important part of the students’ learning process, the highlight of each month is undoubtedly the infant’s visit.

“Attendance is almost always 100 percent,” said Costa.

As a session begins, instructor Mann-Heintz and parents Brittany and Jonathan Horning stand with their baby, Wilson, at the front of a horseshoe-shaped crowd of students. A large green blanket is laid in the middle, which is reserved for the family or students who have permission to come forward. The children begin singing their welcome song, “Hello, Baby Wilson,” and Jonathan carries the baby around the semi-circle so each child can make eye contact.

After completing a round, the song stops and Mann-Heintz leads her student in a short breathing exercise to calm the group and prepare for the session. Everyone sits down and students are encouraged to engage with questions and observations about the infant’s emotional and physical state.

“Has he been sleeping a lot?”



PHOTOS BY DAMIEN SHERWOOD/SIUSLAW NEWS

The Horning family helps show students how Wilson is growing and developing, which in turn helps students learn to relate to his needs and emotions. Mapleton Elementary School has another Roots of Empathy family.



asked one girl.

“Does he sometimes get worried?” asked a boy.

Questions continue about Wilson’s height, weight, teeth and other development topics.

Then the baby is placed on the green blanket and students watch him interact with a toy. This is the first time the class has seen Wilson so adept at grasping objects, a sign his motor skills are improving.

This month’s family visit theme is emotions, so Mann-Heintz asks, “When you learn new things, how do you feel?”

Many children exclaim at once, “Happy!”

Wilson’s father takes the toy away and the class watches Wilson’s brief, longing gaze as the toy disappears. The class then discusses how one can show that they want something.

Mann-Heintz uses the opportunity to ask the children what to do if they detect someone in

need. “If your friend feels sad, what could you do to make them feel better?”

“You could ask them to play with you,” replies one girl after a moment’s thought.

Wilson’s mother begins rocking him in her arms.

“You can also make someone feel better when you hug them,” says Mann-Heintz. “If you have a feeling, it’s good to share that with someone.”

Throughout the 30-minute session, Wilson demonstrates how much he’s developed from the previous visit, much to the delight of the children. When he turns over, grasps an object or vocalizes, the class claps and cheers each accomplishment. New skills are noted and inquisitive students are answered without judgement.

Finally, when it’s time to go, Wilson’s mother carries him around to each student as the children sing their good-bye song and touch his dangling feet.

Theory of mind refers to knowledge or awareness of mental states in oneself and others, such as perceptions, emotions and thoughts.

While much of the field’s research is focused on the preschool period, studies strongly suggest that theory of mind development continues into middle childhood and early adolescence. Moreover, much of the research evinces a heavy association with positive outcomes such as social skills and better academic performance.

In a preliminary study published by the International Journal of Population Data Science in Manitoba, Canada, researchers found that students who completed the Roots of Empathy program had lower rates of teen pregnancy, lower rates of grade repetition and higher rates of high school graduation.

were all positives across the board,” he said. “You have these long-term trends that continue. Even from one year of the program being administered at the elementary level, all the way through high school. That was the selling point for me.”

While many of the immediate benefits of the program make it attractive for any school, the ripple effects of teaching empathic and social competence at an early age has profound implications for tight-knit communities as well as for 90by30’s charge to stem child abuse.

“If you’re teaching these kids these skills now, as they become adults and they have families of their own, some of the behaviors that adults do or do not have that lead to child abuse get stopped at the gate,” said Grzeskowiak. “They do not start.”

In the program’s Planning for Baby session, for instance, the theme of infant responsibility is instilled in students.

“The parent brings the diaper bag and shows the kids all the things you have to take when you’re going to take the baby somewhere and how you have to plan to have all that,” said Mann-Heintz.

Exposure to such concepts and skills early on can give children a head start on the tests life will invariably throw at them. Organizations like 90by30 and programs like Roots for Empathy address this by providing the tools to promote cohesive social structure in a region with a particularly high rate of family discord.

“Unfortunately, our county is a bit of an anomaly,” said Grzeskowiak. “Our DHS (Department of Human Services) referral rates, our DHS rates for children being placed in foster care is higher than normal.”

Indeed, the Lane County rate of children in foster care was almost double the statewide average in 2017, according to Department of Human Services data.

“So, there’s a need here. And this is one of the things that we can do within the school,” Grzeskowiak said. “It has a community benefit and it also has a direct school benefit.”

For parents participating in the program, too, the experience has been overwhelmingly positive.

“So far everybody’s loving it,” said Mann-Heintz. “They’re very pleased with being able to do it. You know, any parent wants lots of people to love their baby.”

Brittany Horning reflected on her experience with the program so far.

“The Roots of Empathy program has been such a positive experience for all of us, and we are so excited to be a part of the pioneering efforts here in our community,” she said. “It has been really amazing to see the transition Wilson has had with the kids. ... I can’t wait to see what happens next!”

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