

BBC RADIO ULSTER

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Friday 1st June 2012

Earlier this week I was fascinated to read news about the launch of a project in Cardiff aimed at reducing bullying and improving behaviour in primary schools.

Basically, the scheme involves bringing a baby into a primary school classroom to teach empathy and reduce bullying.

Seriously!

A local parent and their young baby visit the class nine times over the course of a school year and the pupils observe how the parent and baby interact. The children are then encouraged to interact in a similar, nurturing way with other people. The children learn from the infants and the babies are referred to as "tiny teachers".

The remarkable fact about this scheme is that it's been proven to work. It's called 'Roots of Empathy' and research has found that introducing babies into the classroom results in more

respectful relationships and a dramatic reduction in levels of aggression among participating schoolchildren. Children who have taken part are more likely to accept and help others and to share with other children. One young boy who was quite detached from his classmates, after he spent some time with one of the babies in his class said, 'This baby thought I was special. No-one's ever thought I was special.'

Of course if you think about it from your own experience, this makes sense. Have you ever noticed a change in the atmosphere when someone brings an infant into your workplace? When a baby is introduced into a so-called grown up environment, suddenly there's a distraction from all the petty rivalries and little offences.

For a few minutes we become softer and more human. No one throws the toys out of their pram. When a precious new human life is present all the weariness and cynicism can fade into the background, drowned out by a good dose of oohing and cooing and aaahing.

Babies seem to bring out the best in us.

According to the Gospels, one day the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, were harping on at him, to tell them 'Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

You know, the sort thing. It goes on all the time. Everyone dying to know 'who's top dog around here'!

Well, Jesus called a little child to him and stood the child before his followers and said, 'I tell you the truth, you must change and become like little children. Otherwise, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

'The greatest person in the kingdom of heaven' he said 'is the one who makes himself humble like this child.'

It seems that the idea of learning from 'tiny teachers' goes back a very long way.