

I Feel You

By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog

Several years back, researchers studying motor neurons—the brain cells that control muscles—accidentally discovered mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are brain cells that fire when you perform an action yourself, but also when you watch someone else doing something. In other words, whether you're eating an ice cream cone or watching someone else eat one, your mirror neurons are engaged. Not only does your brain have a kind of map of the sequence of steps that someone else is physically taking, but a grasp of the other person's goals, intentions, and feelings. In short, your brain has you doing what someone you're watching is doing and feeling what he's feeling. Sports fans watching their favorite teams reveal these physical and emotional phenomena that happen to be rooted in the wiring of our brains.

Mirror neurons are thought to play a central role in empathy, and brain scans of people who are especially empathic show motor neuron systems that are particularly active. Equipped with an at-home brain scanner, I'd expect I'd find that my 8-year-old son—despite his forays into stealing, cheating, and lying (in that order)—is one of those people. He doesn't only respond to the obvious manipulations of the heart strings, like infomercials asking for just \$19 a month to ease the suffering of abused animals and starving children. He has also been undone by the image of plump holiday hams tied with red ribbons as the recognition strikes him hard that they used to be pigs.

I can relate. When I was a kid, I went so far as to feel sorry for a half-eaten plate of Chef Boyardee Raviolios, so forced myself to finish them, after which I jumped on the bed and rough-housed with Uncle Chuck. In the end, my stomach was upset, but my conscience was clear. Something about the waste and loss—the pity, almost—of unfinished food would have been worse. (Thank goodness for my eventual introduction to storage containers.)

As painful as a brain full of overactive mirror neurons may sometimes be, all things considered, our society could benefit substantially from a serious, collective case of empathy. Consider the effects of an innovative program called Roots of Empathy (<http://www.rootsofempathy.org/>), which brings a mother and baby into neighborhood schools to interact with children. Studies of this program—implemented primarily in Canada (yeah, I know they're already nicer than we are)—have shown that it reduces aggression, improves social and emotional skills, and increases empathy among school children.

I hope legislation like NJ's new Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/>) is not just formalizing the requirement that our children not harass, intimidate, and bully each other, but that they actually learn how to put themselves in other people's positions, to feel what they feel. Short of a baby in every classroom, there are still myriad opportunities for learning how to consider, care for, and understand each other.

Lucky for us, mirror neurons are there to help us practice empathy, and at a cellular level, no less. Now that's good feeling.