



SEVEN OAKS
SCHOOL DIVISION

community begins here

Community

B E G I N S H E R E

ISSUE NO: 22

January 2004



Confronting Conflict

Schools are taking a proactive approach to addressing behaviour issues.

I hate going to school. There's this one kid who's always bugging me. He calls me names, makes fun of me and pushes me around. One time, I had brought a toy in to show the class and he took it from me. Another time, he knocked a project I had worked really hard on into some snow. He told me he would beat me up if I ever told on him. I feel sick every day just thinking about going to class because I know he'll be there. I don't know what to do...

This is a fictional testimonial. At least, in a manner of speaking.

The reality is that sometimes conflicts arise at school. Conflict may involve name-calling and teasing, or escalate into a physical confrontation. Conflict may consist of a single incident, or it may be the symptom of a deeper, ongoing problem. But no matter what form conflict takes, the result is always the same. Someone gets hurt, emotionally, physically or both.

In the Seven Oaks School Division, education is about more than the academic learning. It's about creating an environment where students feel safe and can concentrate on learning. It's about teaching young people how to channel negative feelings and behaviours into positive directions. It's about providing moral guidance so that students become genuinely good, caring people.

An Emphasis on Empathy

Empathy is probably best described as, "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" – and, at Elwick Community School, that's the primary focus of the entire year.

The entire concept of empathy – what it is, what it looks like, what it feels like – has become part of the school's everyday culture. Students began the year with classroom discussions of what empathy is and what it means to everyone at Elwick. Each class shares their interpretations of empathy through a series of class-created posters on display for the entire school. Empathy is often the underlying theme of school projects, such as art pieces, reading materials and even this year's holiday concert. Staff also wear special "empathy buttons" as a visual reminder to students to always consider the feelings of others in their actions.

"We chose empathy because it made the most sense for the journey we wanted to begin," says Pat Plohm, Principal of Elwick Community School. "We do deal with issues such as peer conflict, bullying and that sort of thing, so it seemed to fit."

"What I'm most pleased with is the response, in a general sense, to wanting to use empathy. It's a notion of how I relate to and treat you as a person. It's not always a tangible thing."

Teaching the Value of Virtues

Margaret Park School has been using an approach similar to Elwick to introduce moral concepts to students for the past year.

Each month Margaret Park focuses on one of seven "moral intelligences" (a term used by Michelle Borba, whose book, *Building Moral Intelligences*, is the foundation for both the Elwick and Margaret Park programs). In addition to empathy, students learn about conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness.

Mondays begin with the Susan Aglukark song, "O Siem" (We Are All Family). Students then spend a half hour of their morning class time working on activities related to the virtue being discussed that week. Students share their projects and what they've learned with the rest of the school at a monthly assembly.

"Both Michelle Borba and Barbara Coloroso (another well-respected educational consultant and author) believe that unless children understand empathy they will not treat other people well," says Pat Stefanchuk, Principal of Margaret Park School.

"Children who have not developed empathy, conscience, and kindness can be the bullies in the school. So it is up to all of us to teach them these moral virtues."

The Restitution Approach

At O.V. Jewitt School and A.E. Wright Community School, restitution is one of the approaches used in conflict resolution. However, restitution is also used proactively, providing lessons in self-discipline.

The underlying belief is that, while everyone makes mistakes, it's important to try to fix those mistakes and to learn from them.

When a problem occurs at O.V. Jewitt or A.E. Wright, the students involved are expected to take responsibility for their actions. The teachers and paraprofessionals play key roles in the restitution process,

listening to the students, guiding

their thinking process through a series of questions, and ultimately helping identify ways to fix the problem. The links between thinking, feeling and doing are frequently explored using phrases like

"what does it look like?
....what does it sound like?
....what does it feel like?"



Having students consider and discuss ways they can “fix things” gets them thinking about positive actions that are helpful rather than hurtful. Instead of having someone simply tell them what they did wrong and what they should do, it encourages them to give their actions more consideration. Once they begin to understand how what they do can affect others, either positively or negatively, they can begin thinking about the kind of people they want to be...and what kind of behaviour that involves.

“Restitution at Arthur E. Wright provides a framework for strengthening our understanding of individual basic needs and it enhances social skills,” says Marilyn Froment, Principal at A.E. Wright Community School. “It helps us to clarify our beliefs and to have our behaviours match our beliefs. It is about ‘being the best we can be’.”

Establishing Common Ground

One of the things all the programs share is an emphasis on building a common understanding of terms and values among all students. A common understanding forms a basis everyone can refer to...and a solid platform for resolving conflicts.

Right from the first day, classes discuss what they see as being important factors in making their classrooms and schools positive environments. They talk about such things as what kind of people they would like to be, how they would like to be treated, what kind of school they would like to be part of and what values are part of making those goals a reality. Issues related to safety, violence and respect for others are key parts of these discussions.

“Without exception, when students discuss class values important to them, being at a safe school is paramount,” says Murray Otter, Principal at O.V. Jewitt School. “On a day-to-day basis, staff do an amazing job helping students resolve their conflicts before they mushroom into bigger problems. Staff on an ongoing basis

do a great job in preventing conflicts from arising.”

“This is achieved through class discussions, as well as modelling and teaching students more appropriate ways to deal with conflict.”

Because the students are directly involved in developing definitions, values and guidelines, they are familiar not only with moral concepts but also with the language used to communicate those concepts. For example, if an Elwick or Margaret Park student is involved in a conflict, they are asked how they could have applied empathy instead of acting negatively. At O.V. Jewitt or A.E. Wright, students are asked to examine how their actions compare against class values. Students understand exactly what their teachers are referring to because they were part of the development process.

Creating a common language and vocabulary can also provide a way to involve parents in promoting positive behaviour. By communicating information about the programs to parents, the parents can begin to use references and words that students are already familiar with. When students receive the same messages at home as they do in school, it reinforces how important the virtues they are learning about are... and how those virtues apply to all aspects of their lives.

Becoming Part of the Solution

Student involvement is essential to the success of any proactive program addressing issues of violence and conflict.

Asking for student input shows them that their voices are important. It reinforces their understanding, their confidence and their desire to be positive contributors to their school. It helps give them the courage to speak out when something is wrong, knowing that their teachers, parents and even their fellow students share their desire to make their school a safe, happy place for everyone.

As a student who had once felt unsafe at school put it, “You showed me (school) was a safe place to be by dealing with the problem.”

Since preventing problems before they occur is the goal, teaching students appropriate ways to act is the first step. As students learn positive alternatives to conflict, more problems can be stopped before they start.



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