

by Ellen Dietrich and
Vince Graham

Sowing seeds

Behaviour codes and bullying

Ellen Dietrich and Vince Graham talk about their experiences developing a response to bullying at Meadowlane School in Kitchener, Ontario, where they served as principal and guidance counsellor, respectively. Meadowlane is a K-6 school, with a wide cross-section of students, whose families vary considerably in terms of income and culture. Its population tends to be around 400.

Our school saw itself as a tough school with tough kids. We wanted to change that image. We began by asking people, "What gets in the way of you having fun here?" Of course, different people in the community have different roles, so the question varied slightly with students, staff and parents. What emerged was the importance of a communal definition of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour--our behaviour code, which took 18 months to implement.

We didn't start out to develop an anti-bullying program. We decided to address the bullying as we were building social skills and implementing our behaviour code; we wanted to move from intervention to prevention. We learned that there is a 3-5 year process in responding to bullying effectively and that a comprehensive approach, which includes a behavioural code, is necessary.

Our behavioural code became the backbone of our anti-bullying program, and furthermore, we learned how multi-faceted a behaviour code is or should be. Often we think about the "pressure" part of the behaviour code which sets out discipline and consequences. Just as important are the encouraging facets of the code. A good code provides pressure and support to all kids. It enables us to decide as a community how we want to be with each other, just like our codes (laws) determine that in our larger communities.

To respond to our school's needs, we built on what we already knew about conflict resolution and further

educated ourselves. We went to workshops and read books and listened to experts. Debra Pepler (York University), who does her research in southern Ontario, was one of our most informative sources. Although bullying situations are similar throughout the world, it was helpful to have this local context out of which to speak to our staff and to our parents.

We shared our knowledge with our staff and did a number of things to bring them on board. Certainly the behaviour code was as important for them as it was for the students.

Initially we taught several units of social skills to the kids while the teacher was sitting in the classroom.

We were teaching the teacher at the same time as the kids! It doesn't have to be done that way, but it is necessary to have some means of ensuring consistency in understanding the language and the curriculum.

We also encouraged the staff to go with their strengths. We discussed different conflict styles, and affirmed them for plugging in where they fit. We didn't expect that everybody would be quick to confront issues or have the listening sensitivity to draw out a kid's story. We drew parallels with academics, noting how ESL or guidance might fill a role that would be difficult to do in a typical classroom.

As we implemented the behavioural code, we worked at developing community agreement about terms like intimidation and harassment. Originally, kids thought there was only a problem if a punch had been thrown or if a weapon had been involved. Building on the concepts outlined in our behaviour code, we worked at more accurately defining the problem behaviours.

We taught them to think critically about power, to identify different kinds of power, to note who has power, and the kind of power that natural leaders are given by the community.

We talked with kids about when a

situation exists where one person has power over another. In those situations, one needs someone from outside to help solve the problem because the

person who has the greater amount of power doesn't need to or want to listen to the other person. It takes someone other than the victim to make a change in that situation.

We taught them about acceptable and unacceptable kinds of power, and encouraged them to claim their power, to decide whether they wanted to use their power in ways that made things better or worse. We talked to them about choices. We especially encouraged those who were silent to think about how they could use their power to walk away from the bullying, or in other ways, diminish its effect.

We asked two things of our kids, to be honest and to take responsibility for their part in the problem. We talked to them about whether they were reducing the conflict or making it worse, and asked the following questions to help them reflect: "What did you do to make the situation worse? What can you do to make the situation better? What do you need to fix here?"

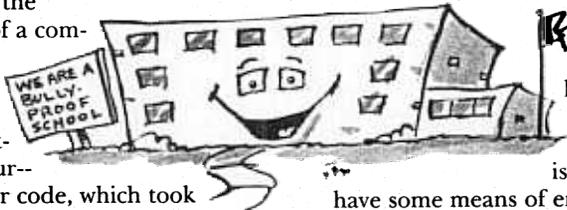
It was very clear to us that we needed to educate all the kids--the victims, the bullies, and the silent majority. Research shows that, developmentally, kids who are ten and eleven years old are preoccupied with how their peers evaluate them. Many of the silent majority in a school don't address bullying because they are afraid either that the bully will turn on them, or that they will get labeled negatively because they have been helpful to or identified with a victim.

In addition, there is a huge fear at this age of being labeled whiny or babyish. That's one of the underpinnings that keeps bullying alive and powerful.

We knew that it was necessary to give the bullies support as well as discipline. Research shows that when bullies lose one victim, they seek out another one unless they are given opportunities in which to use their power more positively.

We worked with victims: we helped them become assertive. We encouraged them to talk to someone about what was happening; usually that

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meant a parent. And then we were very responsive to the parent's call.

We were very honest with them about what we could and couldn't do. As much as they might wish for it, they and we knew that we couldn't prevent them from experiencing any more bullying. We don't believe it's possible to stop bullying; it will always be there. At the same time, we believe it is necessary for schools to provide a mechanism to deal with bullying when it surfaces and to provide consistent follow through, to support all children--the victims, the bullies and the silent majority.

We tried to share our belief with the students that all that happens in life is a learning opportunity, and that they can learn from the good and the bad. We wanted them to have life skills about conflict, power, choices and self-esteem that would travel with them when they left Meadowlane.

We promised to help anyone who approached us. We educated them about bullying, and their choices, and encouraged them to include others in problem-solving. Research shows that kids who have been victimized will fall into that pattern repeatedly unless they are given some specific supports to help them act differently. As far as we know, no situation that we dealt with got worse. So even though that is often one of the victims' fears, that's not what happened when we had the ability to intervene effectively.

We knew we had made significant progress when people began to complain less about behaviour and more about curriculum and academics. "Hey!" we said, "Listen to ourselves.

Our main focus is becoming academics and that's what it should be." We had moved from crisis intervention to prevention.

We kept rough statistics that we used to guide ourselves and to share with others. We knew we were on the right track for lots of reasons, but as our statistics demonstrated that our serious incidents and suspensions were decreasing, we had the proof.

One of the successes we cite is that, over the years, we dealt with more incidents of bullying. We see this as progress because it meant kids were more able to talk openly about what was happening. Our community was beginning to trust that we would deal with it.

Our biggest advocates for our program were former victims. They could speak very effectively about what tools we had given them. They knew what would happen, because they had experienced it themselves. They knew how we would address it, that we would listen to them, and that we would act on it.

Anonymous letters decreased. We began to receive more signed letters and more phone calls, other indications that conflict was being dealt with more effectively.

The school's self-image and culture changed. Students and staff developed more energy for their jobs of teaching and learning.

One of our most satisfying learnings was seeing how smart the kids became at conflict. People would say, "A fifth grader doesn't think that way, or can't get it," and lo and behold, fifth graders could get it. If they were given information, support and opportunities,

they were able to be quite sophisticated and articulate in their analysis of the problem and in developing solutions. It was inspiring!

It was also instructive. Some students developed an expectation that everyone should live by the behaviour code (not an unreasonable expectation!). When parents or teachers or other staff did not seem to be doing that, it proved to be a challenge.

In conclusion, we recognize that the value of planting seeds is important. We are now bringing our experiences from Meadowlane into the two new schools where we work. While, initially, individuals or schools may not know exactly how to proceed, they may take the seeds that are sown to use the next time they are in a situation to bring about a more positive outcome.

Based on our experience, we know it's important to develop a comprehensive, flexible, long-term approach to make a school safe and to provide a positive learning environment.

We also know that it's never ending. It takes a lot of commitment and energy, and it's time consuming. It definitely requires administrative support. Yet it is also clear to us how essential this work is. As educators, we are responsible to teach and discipline and we need to deal with everything in the school community that affects student learning. If students can't learn because they're frightened, or the atmosphere is strained, then we have to address that problem. The payoffs are worth it, even if they are some time in coming.



Youth Drama Project

No other tool engages, energizes, or empowers like drama. Using drama to teach conflict resolution has become a major emphasis of The Network's Schools and Youth Program.

Kathleen Cleland Moyer has written and produced six collaborative plays with youth including:

1. Caught in the Middle (1990)
2. Power Play (1993)
3. Random Acts (1994)
4. The Transformation of Happy Harry's (1996)
5. RED/BLEU (1998)

Using a combination of Forum Theatre and playwriting techniques, Kathleen develops custom-made dramas that reflect the experience of conflict for the group with whom she works. Then, drawing on her expertise of conflict resolution, Kathleen helps the group to generate relevant solutions to the conflicts or problems presented in the drama.

Audiences have ranged from elementary and High school children to youth on the street, young offenders in residential care, teenage mothers in residence, street youth, and children attending after school programs in community centers.

For more information on using drama to teach conflict resolution, contact Kathleen Cleland Moyer, Executive Director, Programs at The Network (e-mail: kcm@nicr.ca).