

Linking Schools by Kindness

Members of the World Kindness Movement are working on a plan to connect young people at school with their peers in other countries. The idea is to exchange stories and suggestions related to kindness, via e-mail. Another aspect is to discuss how kindness can be used to the best advantage in dealing with the problems that are facing young people today all around the world. It is felt that young people are eminently suitable in devising solutions for such problems.

The most promising suggestions will be submitted to government and other bodies each year for consideration. Some form of acknowledgment will go to the schools and groups who present the most outstanding solutions. We also plan to seek the involvement of corporate business, which would entail, for example, presenting computers to the winning schools, plus funding to assist the implementation of the solutions put forward.

The following information would be required from schools wishing to participate:

- * The name of the school.
- * The age of the pupils who will be involved.
- * The name of the teacher who will be supervising the exchange of information.
- * If there is a country of preference (countries belonging to the WKM are Australia, Canada, England, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, Thailand and the USA. It is anticipated Nigeria will join soon). The language used for communication purposes will be English. Some schools may wish to link with schools in their own country.
- * The e-mail address of the school.

This is an exciting project and we urge you to take steps to involve a school near you in this worthwhile endeavour to foster greater kindness and understanding in young people throughout the world. Please send the information requested above to us at kindness@ozemail.com.au. This e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it, and help change the world for the better.

Kindness at School

Many teachers regularly incorporate kindness in their day to day involvement with children. However, we feel there needs to be a more structured approach to ensure that the kindness message is being heard by all school children. This is something parents can raise with teachers, and as teachers are skilled in the art of educating our children, they are the best source of advice on how this should be undertaken. Unfortunately, teaching is a profession where much is asked and expected, but there is little acknowledgment of a job well done. It also involves working in a system that is sometimes unworkable. Under these circumstances it seems an imposition to expect teachers to carry the flag on our behalf. All we can hope for is that some will become passionate about the benefits of greater kindness to children, and find time to offer advice and guidance on the implementation of a kindness program in schools.

Some thoughts we have are as follows. Initially, children in early primary classes can be given examples of acts of kindness, to ensure they can identify what a kind act is. A five minute segment each day could comprise of the teacher reading something about kindness, or the class could be asked to give an example of an act of kindness. It is better for this to be done in class rather than at assemblies, because of the closer personal contact. Ideally, a special time needs to be set aside, say once each week, to discuss, role play, write, draw or paint about kindness.

The children could be asked to make a drawing or painting that depicts kindness, or write what kindness means to them, or create a poem about kindness, or ways in which they can be kind to themselves, to others, to the environment, and so on. They could also be asked to describe why they should be kind to themselves and others, and what the world would be like if people were kinder to one another.

Some schools in North America have collected stories, poems and drawings created by primary school children, photocopied and bound them 'in house', and sold them to raise funds for the school.

Other school kindness activities could be: wash off graffiti or pick up litter in the playground; write notes of appreciation to teachers and staff at their school, and to the 'lolly pop' people and school bus drivers; have each student write something positive about other class members, and pass the notes on to the children they write about; create cards for a special day (Easter, Australia Day, Queen's birthday, etc.) and send them to a retirement village or hospital in the area; write their acts of kindness in a special school journal or their own personal journal or diary; have teachers observe the students at recess and give out special Caught You Being Kind certificates to those seen acting in a kind way; have a competition to choose the kindest person in the community; organise a trip to a nearby area (for instance, a park) to pick up litter; hold a canned food drive to be donated to a charity for underprivileged, abused or homeless people; have a board for children's paintings about kindness, or stick them along the school corridors; create book marks with kindness messages to take home to parents; have a teddy bear drive so police stations, ambulances and children's shelters can have teddies for traumatised children. This can be achieved by asking for a donation of bears, or by raising money to buy them; arrange a special 'get together' event with a rival school, encouraging the children to look for similarities instead of differences; have classes draw murals depicting kindness on large pieces of paper, and distribute them to retirement homes, hospitals and senior citizen/community centres to brighten up the walls; print out on a typewriter or computer some "I'm a Kindness Kid" and "Kindness is Cool" self adhesive stickers, and give to the children (coloured self adhesive sheets with peel off circles or rectangles can be purchased at stationery shops); create a program where children write their commitments to specific acts of kindness on paper cut out in the shape of a footprint. The completed footprints are then taped to the walls of the school, with an accompanying sign reading, "Follow the way to a better school and a better community"; establish specific days of the week to focus on different areas of the children's lives, such as Kindness in the Classroom Day, Good Manners Day, Kindness at Home Day, Kindness to Animals Day, Kindness to Seniors Day, etc.; create 'kindness wands' so that children can anoint each other as Kindness Kids as they witness kind deeds; have children cut hearts out of coloured paper, write their name on the heart, then attach it to the

classroom wall as a commitment to act in a kinder manner; music classes could focus on kindness songs, history classes focus on kind people in history, geography classes focus on kind countries, science classes focus on inventions that have been kind to humanity (care should be taken to avoid comparisons between kind and unkind inventions, countries, etc. - keep the focus on kindness!); the school library could make a list of books that give a kindness message; the school could make an approach to the local newspaper to create a special kindness section which highlights acts of kindness performed by children. This would create a suitable environment for an explosion of kind acts! Each week the school would forward a list of names and a description of the acts to the paper (if the school has its own paper, it could publish this information, too); send letters, poems, artwork from the children to people in local and overseas areas where there is some crisis (war, flood, earthquake, etc); have classes make a pledge not to intimidate children who are obese, or differ in some way from the norm; the teacher could write the first sentence of a kindness story, and the children could complete the story using their own imagination or experience.

School children could also become involved in community service projects. Alfie Kohn mentions one such project, where the children adopt a needy but anonymous family. The family's circumstances are described in detail and the children, aided by the teacher, discuss ways the family may be assisted by the class through donated gifts. Nursing homes and hospitals could also be 'adopted' by a class.

Returning once more to the 'put downs' experienced by children, we read of a case where a group of high school girls pledged they wouldn't tease other girls for what they wore or how they looked.

The idea is to have the children not only thinking about being kind, but also learning why it is good to be kind. By experiencing it in this way, they will be better motivated and more enthusiastic about it. They will also be thinking about and conceiving acts of kindness they and the people around them can undertake.

There are many, many more activities that can be organised to help school children keep their focus on kindness. Keep a diary of your ideas about projects you may be able to influence your local school to initiate. Such activities help to promote a friendlier and more co-operative environment at school. To quote Kohn once again, . . . opportunities to try out prosocial values not only promote learning by doing, but also encourage children to think of themselves as helpful, caring people.

Some secondary schools in America include community service in the curriculum to promote character building. The students are awarded marks according to the number of hours involved in such activities. It is rare to find students who resent being involved in such services, in fact it has been found that many students involve themselves in a greater number of hours than the course requires. It seems that kindness can become a positive addiction!

Mary Pipher writes in her book, "The Shelter of Each Other" (Vermilion, London) of how she and her thirteen year old daughter Sara, spent a year as volunteers in a soup kitchen. The experience had four main effects [on Sarah]. One, it removed her from a shallow and

mean-spirited peer culture and allowed her to spend time with people of all ages. Two, it gave her an education about drugs and alcohol. The people at the shelter who used chemicals didn't look cool or sophisticated, they looked sick and messed up. Three, the work gave her time with adults who were not in a hurry. Homeless people were the first people she'd ever met who had plenty of time for children. And four, Sara learned that she could make a difference. She could give hungry people food and sad people some companionship. This saved her from cynicism.

Pipher tells us that volunteers are happy people, and that by expressing kindness we can rekindle idealism and rebuild a sense of community. She quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who said, Sin is that which separates.

In some overseas countries there is a growing trend to promote projects which bring the young and old together. Older people tend to have more time available to share their wisdom, and they have generally let go of the selfish and materialistic values that seem to drive our society. These story telling projects have been so eagerly accepted and sought after by the young people that the community get togethers have become a regular weekly occurrence.

Children are the future, and kinder children will ensure the creation of a kinder, future world.

Some interesting information from the U.S.

Studies in the U.S. have shown that over 80% of all children enter school feeling good about themselves. By year 5, that percentage has dropped to 20%, and by year 12 it is only 5%. The cause of this staggering decline in self esteem has been found to be day to day peer violence in the form of 'put downs' and bullying behaviours at school, together with criticism by family and other authority figures. Brain washing on a grand scale! While the education system in America has had its share of criticism over the quality of the end product (see next page for one comment), when it becomes generally known that many students are gaining A's in the subject of Hopelessness, we expect even further dissatisfaction to be expressed.

The American study revealed:

- * Students receive an average of 213 put downs per week.
- * Three out of four students report being bullied during their school career.
- * Over 90% of all students bullied advised that it caused lasting social, emotional or academic problems.
- * Over 50% of all so called school yard bullies, if not helped, end up in prison as adults.

The following comparison is from the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* by Stephen Covey (Allen & Unwin), an excellent book that every household could benefit from reading.

Top Disciplinary Problems

According to Public School Teachers in the U.S.

1940 1990

Talking out of turn Drug abuse

Chewing gum Alcohol abuse

Making noise Pregnancy

Running in the halls Suicide

Cutting in line Rape

Dress code infractions Robbery

Littering Assault

Scary, isn't it? Since the book was published, another major concern has surfaced – homicide.

We should be very worried about this comparison. While we may not have the same degree of change here in Australia, how few years do you think it will be before we are in a comparable position, unless something is done to bring about change for the better?

There appears to be a lack of interest as to why we have such problems. Our public institutions seem to have a preference to address the effect rather than the cause. While this may be politically expedient, it has little bearing on the long term solution. If we look for causes, we can find many, but unfortunately there are all too few solutions that could secure a rapid effect on reducing adolescent anti-social behaviour.

It is the nature of youth to rebel. It is also the nature of many parents to assume they know how children should behave. There is obviously quite a difference between the two, commonly referred to as 'the generation gap'. As time goes on the momentum of change gathers more and more speed, and the gap has now become so vast that a wedge has effectively been driven between society and our young people, particularly male young people. Never before have youth found themselves in such an openly hostile and uncaring environment. They must perceive themselves as The Abandoned Generation.

Some of the causes

1. A break down of the family unit. Associated factors are - unemployed, welfare dependant and demoralised families. Emotional neglect and indifference, or inconsistent treatment, by parents. Verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Children who are unsupervised from the time they leave the school to when their parent/s come home from work can also be at risk.

2. Lack of coping skills, such as being unable to cope with their emotions, the pressures of school, the unemployment crisis, the breakdown of friendships and love affairs, put downs by

peers, parents, teachers and others, and the belief that the future will hold only disappointment.

3. The absence of a sense of belonging in the home or in society. This is why young people are attracted to gangs - it gives them a sense of belonging and of 'family'.

4. The generation gap, interpreting adults as being uncaring and even hostile; a disconnection from society; a feeling of frustration and alienation.

5. Poor self worth, a lack of faith in themselves and in the future, a conviction that life is without meaning.

6. Problems at school such as put downs by peers and teachers, verbal and physical abuse by peers, a lack of literacy and numeracy skills.

7. A lack of money and freedom.

The more we learn about the factors having a negative effect on our youth, the greater the chance of being able to offer solutions that will help to change their negative behaviour toward society.

What could some of the solutions be?

(a) How parents can help.

Firstly, to remind parents that no one said that bringing up a child was going to be easy, it is a skill that needs to be constantly honed.

To ensure parents realise there is a need to listen, rather than jumping in early with advice which may not be relevant.

To be a guide rather than a judge, to curb the initial reaction to criticise. There are very few parents who can claim they were a perfect child.

To accept adolescent's dress and attitude as a way of expressing the unique identity of a new generation, and their need to be different, just as every new generation has done in the past.

To realise their children need a positive role model, which includes showing kindness to the child and to others. Young children observe parents and other adults to learn how to behave.

To make it clear to their children that it means a lot to their parents that they behave with kindness and responsibility.

That children need to be validated and feel a valued member of the family.

Praise their good behaviour.

If a child feels cared for, he/she will generally care about others.

(b) How the community can help.

Firstly, to encourage adults to cast their minds back to what it was to be a teenager, to remember the rebelliousness of that time, and the experience of coping in those difficult years, and what problems there were in relating to adults. Suggest they recall such experiences to each other, to members of their family, particularly younger members, and possibly write about them in letters to the editor. A 'reminisces of our youth' evening could help adults to understand and accept the behaviour of today's youth, and lead to a softening of attitude towards youth.

The media in general, and specifically any publication directed toward the elderly, could point out that only a small percentage of young people are involved in violent behaviour. There is nothing to fear from the majority of young people, just as there is nothing to fear from the majority of adults. The media could also feature positive stories about youth.

To have the media regularly feature what is being done or being planned to help young people, so they know the community is aware of their plight and somebody cares. Give them the message, "Hang in there, we know you are hurting and we're working on it."

Have people to whom youths can go and talk about their problems and concerns. We know there are some things young people will not discuss with their parents. It may be possible to use retired people, who could volunteer their services, and who have the time to listen.

Police to be less aggressive toward youth, and train young police to work with young people to help build up a confidence with police, rather than see them as the enemy.

Young people seem to have lost the ability to amuse themselves, a popular past time is to 'hang', i.e. to wait for something to happen. If there is insufficient scope for youth activities in the community, then this should be addressed and methods found to overcome the problem.

Encourage youths to join volunteer organisations, and publicise how such organisations can be contacted.

(c) At school.

The education system encouraged to introduce courses for strategies in coping and building self esteem.

The students could also be given the opportunity to carry out community work as part of their accrual of points for grading.

Teachers could encourage young people to live interesting lives, be self reliant rather than go along with a group mentality, and point out why put downs are harmful. Plus any other methods that will make them feel a valued member of society.

Schools could present stories about altruistic figures, people that the children could admire.

Kindness activities could be encouraged at school, such as helping injured or sad students, intervening when a class member is being teased, etc.

Kindness programs initiated in American schools have shown that they promoted positive changes in behaviour, including an enhancement in self esteem. One study of Kansas primary schools using the program reported that pupils "made overt gestures of kindness more frequently; that they noticed other acts of kindness and passed them on; that there was a greater caring for each other's feelings; and there was a more positive school climate".

Obviously, school kindness programs work, and we are sure that one day they will be just as much a part of the curriculum as maths, English and the other subjects (but more fun!). The concern at this point is that kindness needs to be integrated into the education system as quickly as possible. We urge parents to bring the subject up at P&C meetings and during discussions with teachers. We would like to hear from anyone who pursues this matter, with the object of assisting each other and linking proponents with each other. It is assumed that teachers would be in favour of the idea, but we have no idea how long it may take to implement the scheme.

While it is generally accepted that Australia tends to follow American trends, the following is one trend that we will hopefully avoid. In the U.S., schools are the largest purchaser of metal detectors. The 'children' are carrying so much hardware into schools for offensive or defensive behaviour, that many schools are now installing metal detectors to prevent bloody clashes from developing.

The following is from a speech given by John Taylor Gatto, when accepting New York City's Teacher of the Year award in 1990.

Two institutions at present control our children's lives: television and schooling, in that order. Both of these reduce the real world of wisdom, fortitude, temperance and justice to a never-ending, non-stop abstraction.

In centuries past, the time of a child and adolescent would be occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures and the real search for mentors who might teach what one really wanted to learn. A great deal of time was spent in community pursuits, practicing affection, meeting and studying every level of the community, learning how to make a home, and dozens of other tasks necessary to becoming a whole man or woman.

But here is the calculus of time the children I teach must deal with. Out of the 168 hours in each week, my children must sleep 56. That leaves then 112 hours a week out of which to fashion a self. My children watch 55 hours of television a week, according to recent reports. That leaves them 57 hours a week in which to grow up.

My children attend school 30 hours a week, use about eight hours getting ready, going and coming home, and spend an average of seven hours a week in homework - a total of 45 hours.

During that time they are under constant surveillance, have no private time or private space, and are disciplined if they try to assert individuality in the use of time and space. That leaves 12 hours a week out of which to create a unique consciousness. Of course my kids eat, too, and that takes some time - not much, because we've lost the tradition of family dining. If we allot three hours a week to evening meals we arrive at a net amount of private time for each child of nine hours.

It's not enough, is it? The richer the kid, of course, the less television he watches, but the rich kid's time is just as narrowly proscribed by a broader catalogue of commercial entertainments and his inevitable assignment to a series of private lessons in areas seldom his choice.

And these things are, oddly enough, just a more cosmetic way to create dependent human beings, unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It's a national disease, this dependency and aimlessness, and I think schooling and television and lessons have a lot to do with it.

We teach by example. If we want to be proud of our children, we need to give them an example to be proud of.

Children and Sport

An area where kindness can be promoted is in children's sports. The word 'sportsmanship' is synonymous with fair and decent behaviour, but if we look at professional sport today, some players cannot be seen to be promoting sportsmanship. Children tend to use sports people as role models, and unfortunately some of these role models use aggressive and at times violent behaviour (both physical and verbal), lack good manners and ethics, and occasionally fall into temper tantrums! Certainly not the behaviour we would have our children copy. While the following is obvious, it is given in case it may have slipped by some of us. In studies overseas it has been found that a major proportion of the children who use aggressive and violent behaviour will grow into aggressive and violent adults. Children need to be encouraged to consider kindness and fair play in relation to sport (or any other facet of life), and informed that violence has no part in children's nor adult's sport. To ensure that this is observed, officials need to be ever watchful and penalise where necessary. Parents should also play their part. Side line calls should be restricted to kind words of encouragement, rather than such phrases as "Kill him!", and referees should not be intimidated by parents when calls go against their child or the team the child is playing for.

It is natural for children to want to win at sport. However, the role of parents and coaches should not be to instil a killer instinct, a win-at-all-costs attitude. The phrase of 'letting the team down' and 'letting the school down' is a guilt trip used by adults to cover their own inadequacies – what they are saying is, "You've made me look bad."

Some children feel a sense of anger and frustration, some a sense of powerlessness. One outlet for such feelings is through sport, another can be pounding a pillow or cushion. The physical effort helps to dissipate the build up of stress hormones in our system caused by anger, frustration and powerlessness. In some instances adults may subconsciously try to work out stresses through aggressive side line coaching of their children playing sport.

Long term stress it will take its toll. The stress of having no power in our workplace, the stress of an unsympathetic or driving employer or section head, the stress of irrational actions by motorists, the stress of other behaviour that we perceive as injustices against ourselves. We can be enraged by anger and depressed by hopelessness, feeling that as individuals we have little hope of achieving anything. The truth is that we have the power to create positive change if we choose to, particularly if we band together with a few other like minded souls. But it doesn't come about by blaming others.

Robert Kennedy said, Some believe there is nothing one man or woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills. Yet many great movements of thought and action have flowed from the work of a single person. A young monk began the Protestant Reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World and the 32-year-old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal.

These people moved the world, and so can we all. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that history is shaped.

Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. Crossing each other from a million different centres of energies and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.