

Dealing with violence

Miro Martin reveals how his Queensland primary copes with conflict

At the risk of sounding like a grumpy old man, I want to say that our society dumfounds me. On the one hand, we obsess about child safety and student protection and have mandatory training and police checks for child workers, while on the other hand we knowingly expose our children to a cocktail of violence in the media.

This tide of visual sewage is flushed through TV screens, computer monitors, and printed media. It is polluting the minds of our children. As well as this, we have the domestic violence that many children experience in their own homes. Is it any wonder that we have a problem with violence in our schools?

Modelling

When I was in teacher's college (many moons ago) I saw a short video clip of a research study done by two psychologists, Bandura and Walters. They placed a group of children in a room with a variety of toys, including toy weapons, and showed them a video of people having a picnic at the beach.

After seeing the video, the children were allowed to play with the toys. Most chose dolls, toy cars, etc. When the next group of children was shown a video clip of police beating a mob of rioters with batons the children picked up the toy weapons and began beating each other with them. This demonstration showed, not only the implications of modelling behaviour, but also the power of the media.

We don't let our children go out in the Sun because they will get burned. Why do we let them watch as much TV as they like unsupervised? Their brains are getting 'fried'.

An amusing/sad anecdote; I once had a parent and child in my office. The child had been suspended for swearing at a teacher. When I told the father what his son had said to the teacher he stood up, gave his son a smack across the back of the head and said, "How many times have I told you to cut out the f@#\$ing swearing?"

Systematic desensitisation

Apart from the awful role modelling, there is another side to the violence saturation in the media. To cure many phobias, such as arachnophobia, patients are exposed gradually to unpleasant stimuli in progressively increasing doses. At first, the patient will be shown a photo of a spider, then they will handle the photo. Next, they will be shown a rubber spider and eventually they will be introduced to the real thing. They are systematically desensitised.

Whatever the reasons for violent behaviour, I am convinced that our children can be taught to



be non-violent and I have listed some techniques and programmes that I have had success with in my roles as teacher and principal.

Values-based teaching

I believe that religious schools have an enormous advantage over secular schools due to the value-based teaching programmes they use.

In my own Catholic environment, I use the stories in the Bible in a very didactic manner. For example, there is the story of Jesus being slapped in the face by a Roman soldier. The Bible tells us that Jesus didn't retaliate, but offered the other cheek. I explain to the children that 'offering the other cheek' doesn't mean you become a whipping post for bullies. It is a story about self-control and the ability to change one's mindset.

We need to turn the energy of anger, which will inevitably lead to retaliation and escalation of conflict, into the power of clever thinking. We need to take a few deep breaths and rationalise ... "If I retaliate or get lippy things will get worse and one or both of us will get hurt. If I walk away or simply stand my ground that will probably be the end of it."

The whole staff is on board with this and we constantly encourage the children to turn the other cheek. This may be a case of ignoring, walking away or telling a teacher. We discourage retaliation. The Rock and Water program, described in a separate article in this issue, uses this approach. It instructs children to reflect before they act and either stand their ground (be a rock) or negotiate and walk away (be water)

We have been using Rock and Water over the last three years and have recently trained a staff member so we can have it running all year. We also include girls in the program. It is very popular with the children.

I also use stories that I make up, myself. I have previously mentioned the Namibian Lock Thorn Bush when talking about conflict. When you walk into it there is immediate and intense pain and the initial reaction is to pull away and struggle. This only makes it worse and the more you struggle, the deeper the thorns dig into you. You have to control your feeling as soon as you get caught and gently pull out the thorns, one by one. It is much easier to pull out of a conflict in its early stage rather than later.

Another method that I have found to be extremely successful has been the Restorative Practice approach to discipline. When there is a fight or conflict, instead of punishment and penalty, we get the victim and offender together in a conference and talk about why the offender did what he did and how the victim was feeling.

Together, the students and teacher discuss what needs to be done to make things right or what needs to be done to restore the relationship. A contract or agreement is made and consequences are set if the agreement is dishonoured. I have received a great deal of criticism from some parents about this approach, mainly because it seems too soft. My reply is simply to look at the scoreboard. The number of violent incidents in the playground at my last two schools reduced markedly in a relatively short period of time by

using the Restorative Practice approach.

I used to be the stereotypical principal who gave the children a good roaring when needed, but honestly, yelling and telling off children does not work. Quiet teachers have quiet children. Turning the other cheek is a skill that comes with experience. I wish I had it earlier in my career.

Resensitisation

(This is not a typo!) We can make children non-aggressive by removing the violent images they are exposed to. Turn the TV off. Don't watch the news. Be conscious of your own bad temper when you get angry with them. Replace the negative desensitising images with resensitising ones such as ...

Meditation

I used to think this what a load of the proverbial until I tried it myself. Teaching children to ignore what is going on around them and to be still and silent is a skill that can only be mastered by perseverance and patience, but once the children get into the routine of regular meditation they will expect it and ask for it. Believe me, it works. Once again, my non-research background lets me down, but I am certain that the focus on breathing in and out alters the chemicals in the brain and calms the children down like a packet of Valium.

Structured recess activities

Instead of having teachers do playground duty

like sentinels at a detention centre, have some teachers rostered to supervise games like touch footy, t-ball, softball, etc. At my last school, the school officers gave up their lunch breaks and started a craft club. It was fantastic and the playground was a much calmer place to be in.

Pets in schools

Recently, I had to take my dog to school with me while my house was being restumped. A couple of wild boys were sent to my office with smoke still coming out of their ears and venom in their eyes.

I have never seen such a rapid calming down. As soon as they saw my dog they changed before my eyes and within a few minutes they were patting her and laughing.

Gold Class

One of the most remarkable success stories I have seen has been at my current school. It is the initiative of my deputy, John O'Brien, and his co-teacher, Debbie Huxley.

Catholic schools in Brisbane have a category for special education funding not found in state schools. It is specifically for children with social and emotional problems. We have a significant number of these children in our school and they have been a real challenge in the mainstream classes.

John and Debbie approached me with the idea of forming a special class for eight of our most challenging students. My initial reaction was a

mental picture of broken teeth and bleeding noses.

All these children receive special funding and this is how we can afford to do it. Academic success is not the top priority. Social skills are number one. John and Debbie have gone way outside the square with their thinking and have structured activities such as cooking, gardening, lots of craft and hands-on activities, excursions and, of course, lessons in the key learning areas.

They have very strict boundaries for behaviour. It has been extremely hard work and John and Debbie do not have any trouble sleeping at night, but the success of this program is well worth it.

I have hardly seen any of the Gold Class students in my office. They are achieving success academically and regularly and proudly come to show me their work where once they did very little.

Gold class is not a withdrawal class that gives the other teachers respite. I wish the politicians who control the purse strings would come and spend a day with us in Gold Class, and see how valuable special education funding is and how productive it can be when used cleverly.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to Education Today, .

Art & Poetry competition

Theme: Stop Animal Experiments!

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