

Guidance Home Page

Mr. Rauschenberger

“Building Empathy and Compassion for Others ”



Third Grade

This week during your child’s guidance classroom lesson, children learned about the importance of empathy and compassion for others. This lesson was a follow-up to last month’s lesson on bully prevention. Research has proven that one of the best deterrents to bullying behaviors is to teach children about the importance of empathy and compassion for others. In addition, learning how to be caring is also just as important.

Next, children learned the difference between *sympathy and empathy*. *Sympathy* was defined as, “feeling sorry for someone else.” *Empathy* was defined as, “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.” The ability for children to learn empathy at a young age is so important. This definition comes from the NJ State Bar Association which is based at Rutgers University. Today’s guidance lesson focused on building empathy for others as well as building a stronger more cohesive classroom community.

Children began the lesson by reading a short story from *Chicken Soup for the Children’s Soul*. Students read “Nine Gold Medals.” The story talks about nine Special Olympics athletes competing in a short distance sprinting race. As the starting pistol shot off, the children begin to run the race, all hoping to take home the gold medal. The smallest runner in the race, unfortunately, falls to the ground shortly

after the race begins. Feeling hopeless and full of despair, the eight other runners slowly stop running, turn around and help this boy up on his feet. They finish the race together, each earning a gold medal for their empathy and compassion!

Following this short story, children participated in a *“Bucket Filling”* activity called *“Empty Cup.”* A large Styrofoam cup filled with water was shown to the class. The water filled to the top of the cup was used as a metaphor for our self-esteem. When our cup is full, our bucket is full and we feel good about ourselves. However, when others tease us, put us down and do not show us *sympathy or empathy*, our cup can be drained and we start to feel badly about ourselves. Next, we role-played and children took turns saying “put-downs” to Buddy (a stuffed animal dog), their friend from Kindergarten through Second grade. Children pretended to hurt Buddy’s feelings by putting him down.

Each time a put-down was said, a student volunteer poked a hole in the cup, where water began spilling out. Another student volunteer tried to “plug” the hole with a band-aid to “take back what was said” and “act like it never happened.” As the children could see from the demonstration, the band-aid can only hold the water for so long, and the leak once again continues. This activity is another good visual reminder for the children about how once a hurtful word is said, it cannot be taken back. In First and Second grade, I demonstrated this same principle through “The Toothpaste Experiment.” Children remembered that the toothpaste symbolized hurtful words and that every time someone said something hurtful, toothpaste was squeezed out from the tube. When students tried to put the toothpaste from their finger back into the tube, it was impossible. The damage had already been done.

To further teach the concept of *empathy and sympathy*, children participated in an activity called *“MESSAGES.”* For this exercise, children were given a small piece of paper which contained a message. When told to do so, children were asked to act as if they are at a party, walk around the room and interact with one another, but they must follow the specific directions on their “message.”

Some of the Messages Included the Following:

- Talk only to kids who are taller than you.**
- Talk only to kids who are shorter than you.**
- Talk only to kids with blue eyes.**
- Talk only to kids with green eyes.**
- Talk only to kids with light-colored hair.**
- Talk only to kids with dark-colored hair.**
- Talk only to kids with long hair.**
- Talk only to kids with short hair.**
- Talk only to kids with curly hair**
- Talk only to kids with straight hair.**
- Talk only to kids with freckles.**
- Talk only to kids wearing sneakers**
- Talk only to kids wearing glasses.**
- Talk to everyone.**

Once this activity was completed, children were asked to return to their seats and quietly reflect on the activity through writing prompts. Children had the opportunity to reflect on the experience, telling how they felt. Typical responses often include childrens' frustration with not being allowed to talk to a friend simply because of what their message said. We discussed if this ever happens in real life. Do we ever create these "hidden messages" about who to talk to and who not to talk to? To conclude, children were asked what an activity like "Messages" has taught them in terms of moving forward during the school year and the importance of showing empathy for others.