

A soft touch? Reducing aggression by promoting positive touch and massage at the Willows School Hillingdon

Many people's mental picture of a school for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties will include an image of children (mainly boys) involved in regular outbursts of physical aggression towards adults and pupils. This often leads to the regular use of physical restraint. This was the reality at The Willows School. Over the past two years, however, violence has dramatically decreased, and there has been an increase in positive relationships and behaviour between children, and towards adults. Staff are convinced that this came about through their whole-school emphasis on nurturing and 'positive touch'.

The Willows is a special primary school in the London Borough of Hillingdon, for children aged five to 11 with behavioural, emotional and social needs. Part of the school's mission statement reads: "We are committed to helping our children by creating a positive and nurturing environment where our children can feel happy, safe, loved and respected, and giving them the skills necessary to begin the journey towards becoming successful adults." This is happening, and the school's journey to this point has been both rapid and challenging.

Head Teacher Charlie Taylor took up his post at The Willows two and a half years ago, with the vision of helping the children in the school feel 'happy, safe, loved and respected'. The staff thought long and hard about using these powerful and emotive words in the mission statement, but Charlie is adamant that this is what the school stands for. "We are giving the children love. We make them feel that they belong here, and let them know that we can cope with whatever they can throw at us, and that we will not run away."

But how do you put these lofty ambitions into practice? "I was aware that the most effective teachers do the most praising. Let's face it, children in our school are very aware of what they are bad at, but don't know what they are good at. This is also very true in the teaching profession, where we tend to focus on what went wrong, rather than what went well. We looked at use of language by the adults with children, and set to work improving our 'praise to criticism ratio'. From our observations this now stands at roughly six praises for every voiced criticism. We also focus on what we adults have achieved."

Charlie also worked with the whole staff to develop a 'Positive Touch Policy'. "Which, put simply, means that it is part of your job that if a child needs a hug then you give him a hug, and if his back needs rubbing then you give it a rub." There are very clear guidelines for staff, with proper safeguards in place, and the policy and practices, which have been approved by the school Governors, have led to a dramatic and measurable decrease in aggressive incidents. Charlie also appointed Cindylou Turner-Taylor as his deputy, and sent two staff on a massage course. Massage has now become central to every child's school day, has had a dramatic impact on children's relationships, and has helped to turn the school into what is a genuinely nurturing environment.

Cindylou Turner-Taylor takes up the story: “Positive reinforcement changes behaviour, while negative reinforcement and criticism produces more negative behaviour. We needed to reduce the violence. It seemed like the adults needed to use physical restraint all the time. My view is that the children were pushing us to restrain them, as they felt that this was the only way that they could get the physical comfort they craved. All children need physical contact, and if they can’t get it appropriately then they will try and get it by behaving inappropriately. We wanted to reduce the amount of physical restraint we were using, because it was traumatic for both staff and children, as well as preventing learning. What the children were learning was that a major consequence of their negative behaviour was to feel totally disempowered by adult restraint. Restraint is not a nurturing activity at all, and we were trying to set up a nurturing culture and environment.”

What is a nurturing culture? “The most powerful tool a Head Teacher has is to develop a culture that is in line with the vision of where the school wants to be. And the culture in our school has become totally nurturing. This means that we give unconditional love. This means we will always smile after the event, and welcome the child back. We have firm boundaries that never change, and consequences that always happen. We have rewards that always happen and use lots of praise. We provide lots of practice for things we find difficult. Basically we use parenting skills that most children experience from birth to three years, but in a school environment.”

So are the teachers acting as parents? Cindylou is very clear about this concept. “I am a mother substitute for the children while they are in school, and Charlie is the father figure. If the children want a hug, then we are there for a hug. We are not the children’s parents, but are parental figures. Very importantly we are very supportive of parents, and talk with positive reinforcement to the children about their parents. We support and talk with parents in a positive way, both in school and on the phone.”

But might this approach to physical contact be misconstrued, leaving the adults open to criticism, or worse? “Put it this way: if you have in front of you a child who is struggling with emotional difficulties because his family have been through some terrible times, are you willing to let that child continue to live in pain, or are you going to take the risk and give him a cuddle? What kind of human being would I be if I said, “Oh no! I can’t touch him, because one in ten million people might want to sue me?” We are appropriately parental, and only doing what any responsible parent might do.”

Cindy recognises that adults will vary in their own comfort with, and approach to, physical contact. She sees this as an important learning experience for the children. “A child might touch an adult, and the adult might respond by saying “That’s my personal space, please respect that.” That is fine, as children need to learn about appropriateness of contact at different times and with different people. The children don’t have the right to hug: they have to negotiate that by building a relationship with you.”

The school's approach to positive touch is embodied in the way that massage is used. Charlie Taylor's first investment in staff professional development involved sending two staff, class teacher Colin Franklyn and Teaching Assistant Emily Lack, on a massage course. Colin describes how the two-day course, held at Gibbs Green Special School in west London, has had a major impact on his teaching and thinking. "I must admit that before I went on the course I was highly sceptical. I couldn't imagine the children at this school giving gentle nurturing touch to another person. I just couldn't see it working. But after the two days we were very excited, but unsure how to sell it to the children. "

"So we decided to have a whole-school assembly where we talked about footballers and rugby players receiving and giving each other massages before and after games. The children could relate to this, as it seemed like the only vaguely positive contact they had with each other at the time was a shove or nudge while playing football. We decided to start our own massage sessions in my class after morning breaks. Morning break had always been a flashpoint, possibly because it is short, and unlike lunch break there was often no opportunity for the children to put into practice the positive behaviour strategies they have learned. It was very difficult for us to start teaching and learning when we were taking up to 20 minutes sorting out confrontations. Massage is now used throughout the school and we can't do without it."

The approach to massage used at the Willows is based on the work of the Massage In Schools Programme (MISP). Mia Elmsater, from Sweden and her Canadian colleague Sylvie Hutu, founded MISP, and their vision is, "That every child attending school should experience positive and nurturing touch every day...everywhere in the world." The course at Gibbs Green Special School was provided by the UK-based Massage in Schools Association (MISA). Their mission is "To provide high quality and professional training to all teachers and caring adults willing to bring nurturing touch into schools."

MISA is a national not-for-profit organisation, which is a member of the Anti Bullying Alliance and the Emotional Health Alliance. Their child-to-child massage programme developed as an inclusive whole-school strategy for reducing children's stress levels, aggression and bullying. They train adults to help children to give each other clothed massage, on the back, head, arms and hands. The massage lasts about 10-15 minutes, and takes place daily. All children ask permission of each other before they start, and say 'thank you' to their partner at the end. Children are taught a series of massage movements, which they are helped to visualise by giving them names such as 'brushing the horse', 'the hairdresser', 'brushing off the snow', 'bunny hops' and 'climbing the rope'. Children can make a choice about whether they like or dislike a particular movement; e.g. involving touching their head, and are helped to express this negative preference using positive language.

Colin and Emily found it necessary to add their own flavour to the programme. "We represented the different movements by using large picture cards and putting them on a display, but found that the children were constantly scanning them to remind them of the sequence, and losing their

concentration. By introducing a PowerPoint slideshow of the images we were all able to focus better. We did an observation of each class's massage session, so that we could get the timings right before each slide changed. We have also experimented with the music we play, and the children have helped us with their comments and suggestions. The current favourite in our class is a track from a 'chillout groove' compilation."

Parents have been kept fully informed, and while a few were initially sceptical, a visit to see the sessions for themselves helped them see the benefits, and they are fully supportive. And how do the children feel? 11-year-old Reece is in no doubt. "It works. It helps us calm down after morning break, so we are ready to do maths." 10-year-old Harry agrees: "It helps us calm down, and get more friendships with each other." William feels that it wakes him up, and particularly likes receiving 'ice skating' on his back after a cold playtime, because it warms him up. Not only that, but "it makes me feel calmed down and relaxed. We used to fight a lot, but not now." Charlie, who is six, has only been at the school for a few weeks, and is learning about massage. The children in his class are helping him with the techniques, and to distinguish between giving a squeeze that might hurt and one that is soothing and comforting. How many other children of his age are fortunate enough to learn this in class?

The children are fortunate in other ways too. There is hard evidence that the Positive Touch Policy is working. Like all Head Teachers, Charlie Taylor is required to keep details of all physical interventions carried out by his staff. "There has been a spectacular decrease in physical restraints over the past two years. We have reduced restraints from around 180 a month to an average of 18. We are aiming to get to a point where we have no more than one a day." This is a major achievement. Another important product of the policy and the staff's practice is that children are becoming able to make the important distinction between 'good touch' and 'bad touch'. And they have the language and skills to express what they like and don't like, and to ask someone to stop doing something that they don't like.

Now that the staff have been able to address the children's emotional, social and behaviour issues, they are finding that some of them have significant learning needs, and are able to support their learning more effectively.

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