

KINDNESS

An Antidote to Bullying

By Dianne Banasco

I'd just arrived at St. Oscar Romero Secondary School when a student greeted me with a radiant smile and genuine welcome. We exchanged a few words, wished each other, "Merry Christmas," and he directed me to the cafeteria. We were both 'buoyed' by our exchange.

In the context of the 'science of kindness,' one learns that this 'buoyed' sensation has many far-reaching impacts.

The benefits of 'small acts of kindness' are better understood when exploring the health advantages of these acts. Research indicates that kindness increases one's life span, energy and serotonin, which contribute to happiness, calm and overall well-being. Acts of kindness also decrease pain by releasing endorphins, decrease cortisol levels (perpetually kind people have 23 per cent less cortisol than the average population), and blood pressure, plus depression is reduced when people consistently perform kind acts.^{1,2,3,4}

Benefits are felt by the person performing the act of kindness, the recipient, and observer(s). It makes sense that witnessing acts of kindness can have significantly positive impacts on people when conversely; research indicates that witnessing bullying and other violent acts can have profoundly negative impacts on our students.^{4,5}

Kindness is contagious

Kindness is defined as the quality of being generous and considerate, and is rooted in empathy, compassion and acceptance. It is offering the best of yourself to someone whether for a second, minute or longer. "The positive effects of kindness are experienced in the brain of everyone who witness the act, improving their mood and making them significantly more likely to "pay it forward." This

means one good deed in a crowded area can create a domino effect and improve the day of dozens of people.'⁶

Entering the cafeteria at St. Oscar Romero, I was immersed in this contagious position of witnessing 'acts of kindness.' I was a guest at their 15th Annual Community Christmas Breakfast – headed by administration and supported by numerous staff volunteers, who cooked and served breakfast for their students and community. I was enveloped by the kindness, joy, respect and gratitude that were palatable in the room.

I spoke to many students and alumni, who expressed various ways that they 'pay it forward' in their school community, family and with others as a result of the Christmas Breakfast. That day, an alumni volunteered IT skills to students; at previous Christmas Breakfasts, among other initiatives, a soup kitchen was founded in partnership with community stakeholders.

"When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world."

Harold Kushner

Why use kindness to address bullying?

In addition to the improved well-being and health benefits for all participants of kindness, studies indicate that when regular and purposeful acts of kindness are performed in classrooms and schools, the students performing these acts can experience a boost in peer acceptance. These results are cited in a study, 'Kindness Counts: Promoting Prosocial Behaviour in Preadolescents,' conducted in Vancouver with nine to eleven year olds.⁷

How do we create regular and purposeful kindness in our schools?

Our Catholic framework provides a multitude of rich inroads to purposefully embed kindness into our school communities. Our parishes, Catholic Graduate Expectations, Virtues of the Month, Christian mediation, morning prayers, K-12 religion programs, cross-curricular links and spiritual leaders all offer opportunities for regular and purposeful connections to kindness, empathy, compassion and acceptance.

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: Kindness in your face; Kindness in your eyes; Kindness in your smile."

Blessed Mother Teresa

Toronto Catholic District School Board hosts annual Safe Schools Ambassador Symposiums, which are attended by elementary and secondary school Student Ambassador Leaders and staff facilitators. This year, the theme was Kindness. Ignited by the symposium, numerous schools focused on Kindness as a key theme, resulting in remarkable initiatives and impacts. Examples include:

St. Barbara Elementary School intentionally embedded kindness throughout the school community. With support from Parent Council, the school promoted the theme, "Be the 'I' in Kind." This was reinforced through daily announcements; affirmations that students repeated as a student body, including 'I am a leader,' 'I am loved,' 'I am kind,' school assemblies; and connections to Virtues of The Month. Teachers and support staff also used journaling, cross-curricular activities, bulletin boards and hallways to reinforce the messages of kindness in the classroom and school yard. The simple and consistent messaging resulted in small and notable changes in individual acts by students, and in the school culture. The principal noticed more students holding doors for one another, saying "thank you," and being proud to share their stories of kindness.

St. Jane Francis Elementary School incorporated kindness into their Mental Health Awareness and embedded kindness into their school ethos with a variety of interventions including classroom lessons, prayers such as the Five Finger Prayer; Mindful Mondays incorporated announcements, which reflected on key topics of Positive Affirmations, Kindness and

Helpfulness, peace coming from within, gratitude to ourselves and others, joy and happiness; affirmations, which the school repeated including daily self-affirmations such as, "We believe in you," which also promotes self-kindness; posters and a Gratitude Wall. Resources from the website, Random Acts of Kindness⁸ were provided an abundance of free materials.

Kindness in your school

When promoting kindness in your school community, elements to consider are:

- **Incorporate existing Catholic Values/ Foundations/Cornerstones** – including spiritual leaders, Catholic Graduate Expectations, Virtues of the Month, religion program, cross-curricular links
- **Create leadership opportunities** – with staff and students
- **Keep it simple** – consistent, simple reinforced messages, such as, "Be the 'I' In Kind"
- **Consistent messaging** – using announcements, visual reminders throughout the school, weekly theme days, assemblies, specific activities by grade and division
- **Engage Parent Council** – providing opportunity for messaging and initiatives to be reinforced at home; also as possible source of funding
- **Access school board supports** including Guidance, Mental Health, Safe Schools and Religion Departments
- **Involve community stakeholders** including your parish, public health, the police and other community agencies 

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¹ Kindness Health Facts: www.dartmouth.edu/wellness/emotional/rakhealthfacts.pdf

² The Science of Kindness; Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9UByLyOjBM

³ Can Random Acts of Kindness Increase Well-Being? positivepsychology.com/random-acts-kindness

⁴ Observing Bullying at School: The Mental Health Implications of Witness Status psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0018164

⁵ A Meditational Model Linking Witnessing Intimate Partner Violence and Bullying Behaviors and Victimization Among Youth link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10648-012-9197-8

⁶ How to Change The World With Kindness: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju3ygNPFH98

⁷ Kindness Counts: Promoting Prosocial Behaviour in Preadolescents; ripplekindness.org/school-curriculum/why-kindness

⁸ Random Acts of Kindness; www.randomactsofkindness.org