

Network magazine

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Reducing conflict in your school

In February 2002 five teachers from Peterborough visited Lubbock, Texas, through the Teachers International Professional Development initiative (TIPD) to look at the Character Counts Programme which is now implemented in forty US states. It is also used in other countries including parts of Russia. The programme aims to develop positive character traits in children and young people. There are six 'pillars of character': trustworthiness, caring, citizenship, respect, responsibility and fairness. It is a non-denominational, non-sectarian ethical education programme started in 1993 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in America.

The concept is straightforward and it ties in very closely with the Social and Moral Responsibility strand of the Citizenship Curriculum in England. The teachers from Peterborough observed the programme operating in a variety of early years, primary and secondary settings and within the wider community. It is not just a 'school programme'. It is implemented differently in each setting.

The distinctive feature about Character Counts is that it needs to be reinforced by everybody across the whole school. It is most commonly used as part of a rewards and/or sanctions programme. If a student does something which demonstrates good character they are rewarded. Rewards include:

- trips for the whole class
- special events
- individual awards
- letters home and phone calls to parents. The phone calls are particularly effective as they can be made from the classroom, so they are both public and immediate.

Character Counts is also used as part of the discipline programme so that students who misbehave in any way are asked to reflect on the six pillars, and to say how their misbehaviour relates to one of them.



The programme makes it clear to students what they need to do in order to behave well, and it helps them to understand when they do something wrong **why** it is wrong. It also places responsibility on teachers, classroom assistants and administrative staff to behave in the same way. In this sense Character Counts empowers young people and adults to have high expectations of one another.

Can Character Counts work in Britain?

On return from the visit Liz Bartley, PSHE/Citizenship Co-ordinator at Ken Stimpson Community School, Werrington, and the LEA Group Leader started a process of checking with staff and governors whether or not the programme had something to offer the school. In preparing for the visit Liz had identified that the school did not have a sufficiently strong system for dealing with behaviour issues, so the response from staff towards Character Counts was very positive.

The process of presenting, discussing and addressing concerns about the programme's cultural appropriateness were vital to bringing about a commitment by the leadership team to pilot Character Counts in Years 7 and 8. Discussions are currently taking place within the cluster group to decide if all three feeder primary schools should adopt Character Counts.

The idea of the six pillars was introduced at the new intake day. One of the pillars – respect – was used as the theme throughout the day. Subsequently, other pillars have been examined. The Upper School has been introduced to the programme through assemblies and displays. Those who are 'buddies' work directly on aspects of the programme with pupils in the Lower School.

In-depth training

In February 2002 Dr Nat Cooper from Lubbock University led training sessions on Character Counts. All staff, including ancillary staff and learning support assistants, were trained in the techniques and principles of the programme. In addition, a twilight session was offered to any local school or interested agency in



the LEA. Nat visited Peterborough again in 2003. His training sessions included a community meeting in Werrington with the police, local neighbourhood council, youth workers, early years staff and members of the public. Since the initial visit there has been a subsequent TIPD visit by a group of teachers from Essex.

Positive outcomes

The programme at Ken Stimpson Community School does have an effect on the behaviour of both staff and students. There has been a reduction in the number of incidents of disruption in lessons and the numbers of exclusions have been reduced. Students are also eager to be rewarded for good behaviour and they are more aware when their behaviour is inappropriate.

The OFSTED Report for January 2003 reflects this – it noted that Ken Stimpson Community School is a socially harmonious school; bullying is not an issue and all students are encouraged to be responsible for their own actions and to understand how they affect others. This underpins the rising standards at the school. The report also recognised that personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development at the school was very good and that ethical issues and citizenship play strong parts in the ethos of the school.

For further information about Character Counts, please see *CEN Times*, issue 2, which was distributed with the last edition of *Network*.

Liz Bartley is the PSHE and Citizenship Co-ordinator at Ken Stimpson Community School, Peterborough.

The Kevin project

The Kevin project is a collaboration between Clevedon Community School and Weston College in North Somerset. The project aims to help parents who need support in dealing with difficult teenagers – very often, these are the same teenagers who cause concern at the school.

The school had received funding from the Millennium Fund in 1999 to support parenting activities and set up discussion groups, with a member of support staff acting as a facilitator. These had been successful, but the funding was for a limited period. Heads of Year and tutors had been asking for further similar opportunities to offer parents whenever there were discussions about the behaviour of students, but the school didn't have the resources, either of finance or of staff time.

Harry Enfield to the rescue!

The school has an excellent relationship with Weston College, and is involved in meetings about funding opportunities, particularly with a focus on family learning. It was at one of these meetings that there was a discussion about funding for short courses for new learners. The college would provide tutors, working in collaboration with host organisations which would provide course members and accommodation. This was just the opportunity we had been looking for.



Following discussions between the Headteacher at Clevedon and the Community Co-ordinator, 'Kevin' was born! Using Harry Enfield's character seemed the ideal way of reaching those parents looking for help – everyone seemed to identify with the parents of the child who became a monster just because he/she had reached his/her teens. We had originally thought we would offer the course to the parents from our school, but felt that, as the college was funding the opportunity, it should be opened up to a wider audience. An advert was placed in the Clevedon Mercury, a free paper that covers the northern part of North Somerset, and this resulted in a deluge of phone calls from parents from our school and the other three local secondary schools in the area. We were fortunate

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"Teachers are fighting back against kids who cut class. Today I was the victim of a drive-by math quiz!"

enough to have an interested reporter who wrote a story about Kevin and the course, attracting the attention with an eye-catching headline and a pertinent photograph.

Great demand

Weston College provided a tutor, Tina Seaton; the school provided a comfortable room (not a classroom) and coffee and chocolate biscuits. Initially the course ran for three weeks, with sessions that ran from 7.00-9.30pm. The demand was such that the course ran for a further three weeks, and was ended reluctantly by all concerned. There were male and female parents, some single parents, and several married couples. Tina had planned the course to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of the parents, and there were opportunities for hands-on, non-threatening group work. The strength of this course was the trust that built up within the group, and between Tina and the group. Parents were able to be very honest about their feelings towards their children. The discussions were open and at times emotional, but the relationships that developed within the group were supportive, and parents were able to learn about themselves and what strategies would help them to help their children through the very difficult years of being a teenager.

Our future plans include another series of three-week courses, similar to 'Kevin', a more formal classroom-based course run at the school by Weston College as part of their community education programme, and a workshop-based initiative particularly aimed at boys and

their fathers run by the Wheels project. This particular project would support families where students had become involved in the early stages of the exclusion process. Our parents were involved in a survey carried out by the school and Weston College last term, and they identified understanding and working with teenagers as a priority area (along with language learning and alternative therapies!).

Successful strategies

The Kevin project is successful in helping parents reduce conflict at home. Parents implement strategies which alter behaviour – their own, as well as that of their children – and this reduces confrontation and creates a better atmosphere. This invariably has a positive impact on school life. Not only that, the strategies work in any relationship, not just that between parents and children, but also those between partners and in the workplace.

Lucinda Holdsworth is Community Co-ordinator at Clevedon Community School, North Somerset.

