



About Not Being an Island: Building a Sense of Connection

When poet John Donne wrote that "no man is an island", he was expressing something that psychological research has found to be very true indeed: the fact that, to be happy and well, people must feel connected to other people. (There may be some exceptions – true loners – but they are very few in number.)

School Wordle, Bedford Park Public School

It turns out that the benefits of such connections are significant, various and numerous. For example, people who feel they are a valued part of a group, or have many good relationships, have greater self-esteem and are more resilient, which means that they "bounce back" more easily when faced with the hard times we all must deal with from time to time. Along that same line, they are less prone to depression and anxiety. There are also indications that students who feel a sense of belonging at school stay in school longer and do better academically. There are also great benefits for physical health: well-connected people tend to get sick less often and live longer than those who keep completely to themselves.

Teachers and whole schools can easily involve their students in activities that promote feelings of belonging. The following are a few examples: One easy and attractive project for a single classroom or whole school is the generation of a "WORDLE", students choose words to describe themselves, their class, or their school, and a wordle program (easily accessible online at www.wordle.net) creates a smart-looking image that sizes the words according to the frequency with which they're named (see above). The resulting wordle, based on everyone's input, makes an effective display of "who we are."

THUMBPRINT ART engages all the students in a class or school by having them put a symbol of their uniqueness - their thumbprint - into an outline of the school symbol or mascot. Students may wish to add a key at the bottom of the artwork by writing their name next to their thumbprint, so that they and others can locate their specific contribution.

Thumbprint Project,
Maplewood High School



Building Connections with the
Community – a joint art project at Warden
Ave. PS



To make a **QUILT**, each student uses a protractor to make a quarter circle on a square of paper and colours the paper however he or she would like, then the squares are arranged to construct a quilt. The students see how each contribution adds to the richness of the overall result. One school titled their project "You Are Part of Something So Much Bigger Than Yourself." Note that this activity fits beautifully with the geometry strand of the math curriculum.

(By: Paul Legzdins, Chief of Psychological Services and Cynthia McCall, Psychologist – Area C)



Quilt
Project,
Eastview
Public
School

Remember to view:

- The "Foundations of Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being" online training module on KEY to Learn. This module has been loaded onto everyone's Learning Profile - click on the "MyLearning" tab to get started.
- The Anxiety Awareness Module with your staff. This module can be found on the Professional Support Services webpage under training modules or by clicking the following link: http://tdsbweb/_site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=10486&menuid=42888&pageid=36043

Mental Health, LGBTQ Youth and Importance of Community

Whether or not we like to talk about it, we likely can *all* recall a time in our youth when we felt left out from our peer group or were sad or depressed about our current situation. For LGBTQ youth the feeling of being left out of peer groups and/or having bouts of sadness, depression and anxiety can be all too prevalent. Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO) is a province-wide program working to improve access to services and promote the health of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) communities. RHO identified that “LGB youth have been shown in a Canadian study to demonstrate a risk for suicide that is 14 times higher than for their straight peers (Benigbui 2011). Trans youth aged 16 – 24 were especially vulnerable, with 19% reporting suicide attempts in the past year compared to 7% who were 25 or older”, (Rainbow Health Ontario - <http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/>). Such statistics are extremely concerning and it behooves us to take heed and listen carefully to the LGBTQ identified and/or questioning youth whom we work with.

Of course, not all LGBTQ youth struggle in such ways, as there is much to be celebrated in queer identities. And yet, if we were lucky enough to have a caring and trusted adult who we could talk to and accepted us (without judgment) for exactly who we were during those (often fragile) years of our childhood and youth then we know what youth need who have not had that experience. It is up to us now to be that adult and create safe spaces in our schools, our office and our classrooms for the children and youth that we are fortunate to be working with each and every day. Feeling different, isolated and insecure are not what we want for ourselves or the children in our lives whom we care about. Stigma related to mental illness along with stigma for being LGBTQ can keep us all silent. Finding ways to talk about stigma and work on eradicating it from our lives is essential so that we may all be who we are, love who we love and maintain good mental health and wellness.

Talking about painful things is not easy at times but with campaigns such as Bell, “Let’s Talk” and the TDSB’s first (and very own) Annual Secondary School Mental Health and Well-Being Belongs to Us Symposium and “Jers Vision” for LGBTQ and allies creating safe spaces conference (both held in November 2014), there are opportunities to debunk myths about mental health and what it means to be an LGBTQ youth. Such campaigns and symposia can create much needed dialogue. And, there is always the team of professional support services staff to talk with.

The Canadian Mental Health Association recently released a report (<http://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-people-and-mental-health/>), examining the experience of LGBTQ youth in Ontario and reported that while determinants of health play a key role in mental health and well-being for us all, social determinants of health are particularly significant for LGBTQ youth. Specifically, “Social inclusion; freedom from discrimination and violence; and access to economic resources.” This reminds us that a community of people around us who care about our well-being and mental health is the cornerstone to the reduction of stigma and a future that looks all the brighter. The Gender-Based Violence Prevention office provides Positive Spaces Training across the TDSB in order to mitigate violence and discrimination based on relationship violence, gender identity and sexual orientation, while also engaging teachers and administrators to be an ally for students who need it most. Being a Positive Space representative at your school is a good way to not only begin dialogue but to ensure that safe spaces are available for all children and youth in your classrooms and school community, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Reducing stigma for our students (whether it be about mental health and/or gender identity and sexual orientation) is not only smart, it also lays the groundwork for a path towards healthy relationships and a safe and positive future for everyone.

(By: Andrea Joyce, Social Worker – Gender-Based Violence Prevention)



Students attending the LGBTQ Youth and Mental Health Workshop at the First Annual Secondary School Mental Health and Well-Being Belongs to Us Symposium

Upcoming Events

Students as Champions of Mental Health and Well-Being Secondary School Forums – February 20th (East), February 27th (West), 2015 at Central Toronto Academy – 570 Shaw Street

“Change the View” Video Contest – contest opens February 19, 2015 and closes April 9, 2015. For more information please visit:

http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/news_and_events/ctv2015-about-the-contest.php

Children’s Mental Health Week: May 3 – 9, 2015

Mental Health and Well-Being Awareness Parent Symposium: May 9, 2015 at Earl Haig Secondary School

Connecting with Care

The Connecting with Care program at Sir Samuel B. Steele Jr. P.S is one of the successful Initiatives of our Caring and Safe Schools/Mental Health Committee. The impetus of this initiative was to support students who appear to experience social anxiety. At the recommendation of our principal, at the beginning of each year, homeroom teachers recommend a student or two from their classes who they believe could benefit from a few moments of daily social interaction from another school staff member. After this list of students is assembled, a staff member voluntarily commits to connecting with one of these students on a daily basis over the course of the school year.

The staff members learn the student names, greet the student in the hall and the school yard, and take extra time to deliver intentional care to the students. This initiative is also supported by our office administrator and chief caretaker.

The Connecting with Care program has been operating in our school for the past seven years with a high degree of success. Our experience has shown that the daily communication between student and staff member has had several tangible results. The students develop a sense of belonging and that there are adults in the school who do care about them. As the year progresses, the student/staff interaction results in a comfortable, trusting communication.

The successes in this program are tangible and illustrate the fundamental value of education, which is that everyone counts. It speaks volumes about the caring nature of our school staff who enthusiastically participate in this worthwhile program.

(By: Mei Lian Lam, Principal and Themis Drakos, Teacher - Sir Samuel B. Steele Jr. P. S.)

Educators With a Sense of Well-Being Feel:

- Physically well, nourished, and active
- Physically and psychologically safe
- Loved, included, valued and supported at home, school and in the community
- Able to participate in productive activities including being successful teachers
- Able to form and sustain healthy relationships
- Able to cope with adversity – are resilient
- That others care about their well-being

It's all about relationships!

Bruce Ferguson
SickKids & U of T
Principals Summer Institute
August 18, 2014

Extracurriculars and Mental Well-Being

At James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy we believe that the best way to make students feel part of the school community is to make sure each and every one is involved in at least one extracurricular activity outside of the classroom each term. In fact, we believe in the above so strongly, that not only is it part of our school improvement plan, but students are also encouraged to bring ideas to staff if they feel there is something missing.

Not only do we offer every possible elementary school sport at both the grade 6 and grade 8 levels, but quite often we will have more than one team so we can include as many students as possible. Our dedicated staff goes out of their way to make the range of activities offered at James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy second to none in the Toronto District School Board. Where else would you see spinning, yoga, drama, yearbook, ping pong, I-Pad Movie Club, floor hockey, dance, mini-stick hockey, Scrabble Club and a fishing club? Yes, a fishing club, and that doesn't even begin to cover what we offer to our students. Every teacher is involved in at least one club or sport, some many more, and their leadership makes the students want to follow along and be a part of it. You become part of the caring environment the second you enter our doors and students travel from afar to be at James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy.

Finally, and this might be the most important piece we do, is track student participation by term to make sure we are not leaving any students behind. Once we know which students are not involved in any form of activity, we sit down with them and their parents at interview time to put a plan in place for the next term.

At James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy, we know that a healthy body leads to a healthy mind, and all of us go out of our way to make sure we always put the students first resulting in them wanting to come to school every day.

(By: John Currie, Principal – James S. Bell JM SWA)



Girls Basketball Team, James S. Bell Junior Middle Sports and Wellness Academy

Mental Health and Well-Being Core Leadership Team

Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff, Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support

Rose D'Alimonte – Chief of Social Work/Attendance – Area D

Marcia Powers-Dunlop, Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services

Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care