

Presentation to Parents Wanaka Primary

Hi my name is Rose Copland. I am the RTLB for the Upper Clutha area. I work in all the schools here in classrooms up to year 10. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term RTLB, it stands for Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour.

My job covers a wide range of things. I work with schools, teachers and parents to support individual students or even whole classes with learning problems, behaviour problems or a combination of both. My job involves a lot of observation of what is happening which of course can look like I'm not doing much at all. On one occasion a year 10 boy said to me "Excuse me. I don't mean to be rude but what exactly is your job because I'd like a job where you sit and do nothing too." As you can imagine, my job puts me in the privileged position of seeing a lot of what is happening in our schools which is probably why I've landed this job tonight.

It would be wrong for me to suggest that there is no bullying in schools in this area because it does exist. However there are many situations described as bullying which have been the result of an impulsive act, or lack of thought, rather than intended harm.

There is always conflict between students in schools, just as there is in any sector of the community. It's human nature. For this reason our children need specific teaching on how to handle these situations. We need to teach them resilience and we need to teach them to speak up when they see something happening that they know is not right. These are not skills you learn by accident. From the time they start school teachers are teaching them the skills they need to interact successfully with others and to become resilient and resourceful.

In the course of my work I spend quite a lot of time observing what is happening in playgrounds. I'd like to give you an insight into what I am seeing. I find that in general school playgrounds are safe friendly environments and the majority of children are having a lot of fun. The kinds of problems I do see happening are :

Arguments over the ownership of property and toys.

Kids wanting to control games and who can play them.

Arguments over the rules of games. This can carry over into the classroom and even the next day.

Friendship problems and children being left out. It's quite common for children to be friends one day and not the next.

Name calling

Swearing

Cattiness amongst girls. Nothing new there.

These are things you would see in any playground in New Zealand. I don't often come across physical violence.

Many children are quite self centred. They very much want to express their own point of view, but they are not good listeners and they don't seem to be able to move on from their problems. Teachers spend a lot of time trying to help children sort problems out.

So how are we teaching our kids? What are the things that are happening in school?

The New Zealand Curriculum identifies five key competencies. These competencies are like an umbrella over everything else we teach and have been identified as skills which students need for living and lifelong learning.

One of these is Relating to Others. I'd just like to read you two short quotes from this section.

This competency includes the ability to listen actively, recognise different points of view, negotiate and share ideas.

Pretty hard to argue with this.

They (students) are aware of how their words and actions affect others.

Within school environments there is always teaching happening, planned and also incidental as situations arise. Specifically, all school communities have their own values and expectations. Children are taught these in a variety of ways. You will see posters up in classrooms and other parts of the school as a visual reminder of what is expected and also posters as reminders of what not to do. Specific teaching using role plays happen. Class contracts are negotiated and you can guarantee the word respect is in there somewhere. I know of one class in the area who has made a video of what the school expectations are. Throughout the day teachers refer back to the expectations asking children reflective questions about their actions.

Teachers of year 1 -3 students in most of our schools have completed Incredible Years Teacher Training funded by the Ministry of Education in a response to a request from teachers across the country for help with behaviour. These teachers have learned the importance of teaching students feelings vocabulary so they can express themselves more easily. This is not something that comes easily to many of us but is important for children trying to communicate with others. They are also teaching basic skills such as how to ask for something, and using please and thank you. Teachers sometimes have to model and coach children on how to play and relate to others.

Teachers often structure group learning in classrooms so that children all have a role to play and the success of the group depends on the participation of all and how well they work with each other. The cooperative skills learned here are also important in the playground.

A lot of classrooms use circle time. In circle time Students have the opportunity to talk about playground and other issues affecting them and problem solving skills are used to find solutions. There are strict rules for circle time so that all students feel safe and listened to. It is a good forum for teaching students to listen to others and respect differing points of view.

No matter how much teaching we do, children will still find themselves in situations where more is needed.

All our schools teach the children pathways to follow. You might hear your children talking about 'Using their wits' or "using the bugging off procedure" If you haven't already done it, ask them to tell you about what they are taught to use.

If a child is having a difficulty, the first thing the teacher is likely to ask is: "Did you use your wits?" "Did you use the bugging off procedure?" "Did you make an I statement?" It is important that the kids try to solve things for themselves in the first instance.

If these things don't work it is important they tell a teacher. The children need to go to a staff member they trust as soon as they can. This is where communication sometimes breaks down. Sometimes the first teachers know about a problem is when parents contact them.

Teachers will listen to both sides of the story and help students resolve the situation. However as you can imagine, sometimes it gets very complicated and needs quite a lot of investigation which is also very time consuming. At this point principals will often become involved. It is important that each child has a chance to tell their story. It's not always easy to work out exactly what has happened as stories will vary. This doesn't necessarily mean someone is lying but children do see things from different perspectives and as we said before they usually think they are right.

Schools usually contact parents in these situations. I think as parents the important thing is for you to stay calm, remember that there are two sides to every story and you need to keep an open mind. While you need to support your child, you can do this best by talking to them about what they can do to. Learning from situations is the most important thing.

Our schools all work in a restorative way. That is they use the restorative chat to help children see what is needed to make things right again. If there is a bigger issue a full conference may be requested and you as parents may be asked to be involved. This is not a soft option. In order to put things right there may still be a consequence. RTLB local research shows very few students end up in a conference more than twice.

So what happens when a school finds they cannot deal with a situation on their own or that students might need more help with developing social skills or anger management?

This is often the point where I am called in.

There might be a social skills group set up where children get opportunities to learn about and practice the things they need to know about building relationships with others.

Older children as big buddies might be used to support younger students in the playground, helping them make right choices. Sometimes a teacher aide or other adult might track the child and be there to

guide them through the choices they make. While this is a good option, most schools would struggle to fund this.

We have anger management programmes available such as Volcano in My Tummy which we can work through with children.

One particularly good intervention that I have used in all schools at some stage is Circle of Friends. In this programme a support circle of about six peers is set up to help the selected student set goals and to give them feedback on how they are going. It is adult directed at weekly meetings but the children respond much better to peer feedback than they do to adult feedback.

We can tailor our interventions in many ways to support students and if we need to we can seek help from outside of school. To me the important thing is that parents and school are working together as a team to get the best outcome for the child and more often than not this is what I see happening in our region. And while we might think it would be easier to take the child out of school and try another school we need to ask ourselves whether this will help the child develop the skills they need to solve their problems. Think long term.

I would just like to finish by saying that from early in my time here in Upper Clutha what I have noticed is that teachers here work hard for good outcomes for all our children. They stay very positive and don't give up on children. In other places in New Zealand there are more stand downs and exclusions even at very young ages. So let's all continue to work together and give our children the skills they need to be successful in life.