

Guidance Home Page

Mr. Rauschenberger

“Building Empathy and Compassion for Others ”



Third Grade

This week during your child’s guidance classroom lesson, children learned about the importance of empathy and compassion for others. This lesson was a follow-up to last month’s lesson on bully prevention. Research has proven that one of the best deterrents to bullying behaviors is to teach children about the importance of empathy and compassion for others.

Next, children learned the difference between *sympathy and empathy*. Sympathy was defined as, “*feeling sorry for someone else.*” Empathy was defined as, “*putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.*” The ability for children to learn empathy at a young age is so important. This definition comes from the NJ State Bar Association, based out of Rutgers University. Today’s guidance lesson focused on building empathy for others as well as building a stronger more cohesive classroom community.

Children began the lesson by reading a short story from *Chicken Soup for the Children’s Soul*. Students read “*Nine Gold Medals.*” The story talks about nine Special Olympics athletes competing in a short distance sprinting race. As the starting pistol shot off, the children begin to run the race, all hoping to take home the gold medal. The smallest runner in the race, unfortunately, falls to the ground shortly after the race begins. Feeling hopeless and full of despair, the eight other runners slowly stop running, turn around and help this boy up on his feet. They finish the race together, each earning a gold medal for their empathy and compassion!

To further explore and teach the concept of *empathy and sympathy*, children participated in an activity called “*MESSAGES.*” For this exercise, children were given a small piece of paper which contained a message. When told to do so, children were asked to act as if they are at a party, walk around the room and interact with one another, but must follow the directions on their “message.”

*****Messages Included the Following:**

- Talk only to kids who are taller than you/shorter than you.**
- Talk only to kids with blue eyes/green eyes.**
- Talk only to kids with light-colored hair/dark-colored hair**
- Talk only to kids with long hair/short hair.**
- Talk only to kids with curly hair/straight hair.**
- Talk only to kids with freckles.**
- Talk only to kids wearing sneakers**
- Talk only to kids wearing glasses.**
- Talk to everyone.**

Once this activity was completed, children were asked to return to their seats and quietly reflect on the activity through writing prompts. Children had the opportunity to reflect on the experience, writing down their thoughts and feelings about the exercise. Typical responses often include childrens' frustration with not being allowed to talk to a friend simply because of what their message said. We discussed if this ever happens in real life. Do we ever create these "hidden messages" about who to talk to and who not to talk to? To conclude, children were asked what an activity like "Messages" has taught them in terms of moving forward during the school year and the importance of showing empathy for others.

After "Messages," children participated in one more empathy building exercise called "Crossing the Line" (a.k.a "The Power Shuffle"). The children were read several statements about different events and incidents that may have occurred in their lives. If those incidents pertained to them, they were asked to "cross the line." Students moved from one side of the hallway to the other side of the hallway. Some of the prompts that were read included the following:

- 1) "Cross the line in silence if you've ever been teased about your name."
- 2) Cross the line if you've ever been picked last in a game or activity."
- 3) "Cross the line if you've ever felt alone, unwelcome or afraid"
- 4) "Cross the line if you've ever felt pressure from your friends or an adult to do something you didn't want to do."

Once this activity was completed, children were asked to return to their seats and quietly reflect on the activity through writing prompts.

Some discussion questions that followed the activity included:

- *"What are some feelings that came up for you during this activity?"*
- *"What was the hardest part about crossing the line?"*
- *"What did you learn about yourself?"*
- *"What did you learn about your classmates?"*
- *"What do you want to remember about this experience?"*
- *"What do you want to tell others about this experience?"*

At the conclusion of the lesson, children were given the opportunity to share some of their thoughts and feelings. This activity can be very powerful because, if anything else, children can see that they are not the only ones who've experienced difficult times in their lives and that there's "strength in numbers."

