



The WCPA News

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Promoting Effective Change in School Climate

By Michael E. Mahon, M.A.

There are a myriad of issues facing today's schools. Bullying, substance abuse, challenging families and emotional problems are only a few. While the task often seems daunting, it is the responsibility of schools to provide an environment in which each individual student has the opportunity to achieve his/her potential. Many schools are incorporating new "character education" programs into their curriculums as a way to live up to this responsibility and combat some of these growing concerns. Examples of these programs include "Assets" and "Second Step". To truly understand the benefits of these programs however, we must first understand what they are meant to do.

At their core, all of these programs attempt to change the school climate at a fundamental level. The idea is to give children internalized social values as well as the support they need to remain true to these values in the face of negative peer pressure. When managed appropriately, the benefits of such a program are many. Such a program promotes academic success, conflict resolution skills, emotionally safe environments, responsibility, trust, social skills, increased self-esteem and recognition of appropriate boundaries. At the same time, these programs reduce discipline referrals, school anxiety, drug and alcohol use, absenteeism, conflict in the classroom and depression. For such a program to work however, there must be a commitment by the school for a fundamental change in the total school environment.

To truly change school climate, we must begin by making sure that the total school environment is involved. Administrators, faculty, parents and children must all be included and invested in the process. A meaningful change in school climate encourages character development and holds individuals responsible for their behavior. This includes not only the children but also the faculty, administration and parents. All adults in the school must reflect and model the behaviors we expect from the children. As professionals, we cannot expect our children to exhibit behavior that we ourselves do not consistently model. Consider how the school staff handles conflict among themselves, how administrators and teachers show respect to those in their charge, and how integrity and discipline is honored amongst the school's adults.

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Social Skills and Parenting Groups Currently Available!

Through our work with families and schools, we often hear that parents are seeking support and knowledge in parenting their children. Good communication, limit setting and discipline often become difficult to navigate amidst today's quick-fix, materialistic society. In addition, there are clear concerns about the social challenges children face on a daily basis, such as friendship making, bullying, managing conflict and communication skills.

For families desiring improvement in these areas, assistance is available. WCPA offers Social Skills Groups for students of all ages and Parenting Skills Groups for one or both parents. Clinical therapists run both types of these groups, and openings are currently available. Families are welcome to call our office with questions regarding the duration, cost and structure of the groups, at (314) 275-8599.

School Climate (Continued)

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

Much of the current research is indicating that the classic “trait of the week” approach is ineffective (Kohn 1997; Lockwood 1991). Therefore, it is not enough to simply have a “Word of the Month” or a “Recognition of Good Behavior” program. Indeed, these types of information transfer do not yield lasting results for several reasons. First, they do not offer guidance in choosing between conflicting values. Second, they do not translate easily into difficult, real-life situations. Finally, the cognitive development of the children who are targeted by such programs is often not advanced enough to use this information in abstract ways. Instead, the school must be willing to look at itself from the top down and not assume change can occur from the bottom up. In other words, true change begins with the adults in the building, not with the children.

In addition to the self-reflection and change required on the part of school professionals, parents must be welcomed into the system. Parents should be encouraged to know and understand the school’s mission statement and character education program. Training should be available to parents on topics such as discipline and limit setting, building relationships with their children and with the school, effective communication methods and modeling expected behavior to their children. Administrators can also consider how interactions between parents and school professionals exemplify the school’s mission and model expected skills to the students.

It is also important to note that the literature suggests an educational consultant is critical to the successful implementation of such a program. Consultants can be helpful in providing the necessary framework for this comprehensive change process. Outside consultants contribute to objectivity, are better able to monitor the continuity of the change process and are able to advise on solutions to problems that arise in the change process. Consultants can also provide the necessary training for the administration and faculty on making the essential changes within their own policies and choices, and training for parents on the topics outlined above.

The ultimate goal of any program of change in school climate is to create a safe school environment that promotes academic success and emotional well-being. The earlier these types of environments are a part of a student’s school experience, the more profound the potential change on that student. An individual educated in such an environment will be more likely to develop and remain true to an internal moral compass. They will be significantly less susceptible to the influence of negative peer pressure and they will develop significantly higher levels of self-esteem. Obviously, schools reap both immediate and long-term benefits from making these challenging, but worthwhile commitments. These programs, therefore, are worth doing well.

For more information on this topic or any other questions you might have, please contact Mike Mahon at (314) 275-8599.

Michael Mahon, M.A. has worked in the fields of addiction for over 15 years. He is currently the director of WCPA’s Chemical Dependency Program, providing substance abuse assessment and treatment to individuals and groups in the office and leading at-risk groups and treatment groups on-site at schools. He also provides consultation and training to schools on a variety of mental health and school climate topics. In addition, Mr. Mahon offers mental health therapy to adolescents and their families.

From the Director

I hope your holidays were really enjoyable. Mine certainly were. Having wonderful grandchildren makes these times especially memorable. This year, I found myself thinking about how fortunate so many of us are. I look at how much all of our children have. While it certainly pleases us that we are able to give to our children, the conclusion I often come to is that too many have too much. I look at how easily things come to our children. Sometimes they don't even have to ask. I see so many parents who, out of great caring, anticipate their child's wants. But it makes me wonder about the effect all of these possessions have on our children. Do our children know the value of all that they are given? Do they know how to wait for those really big and important items that they ask for? Do they realize that these are gifts and not necessarily anything that they are due? Are their expectations that they will continue to receive like this for the rest of their lives? What are they asked to give in return? Do we do too much for our children and not expect them to do for themselves?

I think this can have great implications in the classroom. We have many children in our schools who have no trouble waiting. However, we also have children who have great difficulty in this area, who have little capacity for delayed gratification. They are so accustomed to getting what they want, when they want it, that their frustration tolerance level is very low. They expect teachers and administrators to meet their needs on an immediate basis. We make the assumption that students come into our schools knowing how to appropriately wait. Yet one of the common complaints coming from today's early grade teachers is that they have children who can't stay focused, can't pay attention, can't follow directions, can't wait. They lack the rudimentary skills that are necessary for learning.

Perhaps the best gift we can give our children is teaching them wait time or tolerance for frustration. But this requires us as parents and teachers to behave in a different way. First of all, we don't anticipate all of their wants. We allow them to wait for what they want. It is important that we give them something to struggle against so that they develop the character and strength to overcome difficult obstacles. This requires thought, time and effort from us. We must teach our children to function according to the demands of the system, whether it be home or school, and not their own egocentric reality.

Perhaps we should look more closely and thoughtfully when we think about our children's wants and needs. What can we give to them that will bring true peace and joy?

- *Mary Fitzgibbons*

Recognizing and Responding to Obsessive-Compulsive Behavior

By Amy Maus, MSW, LCSW

Johnny never seems to turn in assignments on time. His teacher knows he works diligently every day, but somehow his work isn't handed in for grading. Instead, there are the excuses: "I'm not done yet. I had to start over." While other students in the class erase mistakes and move on, Johnny starts over with a clean, blank page after making any small error. He's falling further behind in his work, and his grades show it.

Rather than a behavior problem, Johnny is exhibiting signs of an anxiety disorder called Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD.) Obsessions are recurrent thoughts or mental images that cause a person anxiety, while compulsions are repetitive behaviors that the person feels driven to perform in order to reduce this anxiety. For example, a student may compulsively wash her hands to combat her obsession about germs. The most common rituals for kids and teens include washing, checking and ordering. OCD can be thought of as "hiccups in the brain," getting an otherwise normal person to repeat certain actions over and over again. It's similar to the feeling we all get when leaving on vacation, wondering several times if we turned off the gas and locked the doors. However, for OCD sufferers, these worries are so severe that they intrude on the ability to live a normal life. OCD can effect students of all ages, both boys and girls, and is not purposeful misbehavior.

If your school has a student who shows these types of symptoms, help is available. Treatment for these students usually involves a combination of medication and therapy. The medication can usually be ended once therapeutic gains begin to be realized. Therapy focuses on gradually learning to refrain from performing compulsions while tolerating the resulting anxiety. It is absolutely essential that the school and therapist form a working relationship, in order to assist the school in reacting to the student's symptoms and assist the student in making behavioral improvements at school.

If you have further questions or interest in OCD, please feel free to contact Amy Maus at the WCPA office, (314) 275-8599. Behavioral therapy for students or adults with obsessive compulsive problems is always available.



Dr. Mary Fitzgibbons, Director

FOR PARENTS ONLY:

Creating Successful Children
By Michael E. Mahon, M.A.

Every parent wants to believe that their child is going to grow up to be a healthy, happy, successful adult. As parents, we often overlook the dysfunction within our own families or choose to believe that our children will overcome these shortfalls. The truth is that successful children are created. Children become successful when they are given the tools to develop and remain true to their own internal moral compass. It is our task as parents to encourage skill sets in our children that promote this future success. The following are a set of skills known as "The Seven Characteristics of the Silent Majority." Research has found that children who possess these characteristics show a resistance to negative peer pressure and a resiliency in overcoming adversity. In addition, these children are far less likely to bully or be bullied and have, on average, higher levels of self-esteem and academic performance. As parents it is important that we instill these characteristics in our children.

- 1) They do not insist on their own way arbitrarily.*
- 2) They usually give a reason for why they disagree.*
- 3) They know how to apologize and do.*
- 4) They compromise or suggest cooperation.*
- 5) They share or offer to share later.*
- 6) They can change the topic and redirect the action.*
- 7) They can use humor to defuse a situation or to deflect attention.*

The most effective way to convey these qualities to our children is by modeling them ourselves. Do we as adults compromise, apologize, and share? Our children look to us to determine how to behave socially. Do we display the above qualities? Talk to your children about moral character and model the above characteristics to them.

It is also important that parents set appropriate rules and limits, reinforce prosocial behavior, and enforce fair, reasonable consequences for children. As parents we cannot just model good behavior and expect children to be good. Children, just like all human beings, learn from reward and consequence. While it is often difficult to limit our children's behavior and consistently give consequences, the benefit is tremendous for them later in life. Remember that successful adults are created – it's not just luck.

If you have any questions or concerns about children or parenting, please feel free to call West County Psychological Associates. Counseling is available for children, adults and families, and social skills groups are available for students.
