

Tampa Bay Times

Empathy programs help students try a little tenderness

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PLANT CITY — At Tomlin Middle School students are learning to be kinder and gentler.

A program called More Than Me Day is teaching seventh-graders to open up about their emotions and empathize with others. The goal is to promote conflict resolution and curb bullying and feelings of exclusion.

"It's important for kids to develop a rapport with adults and to learn skills to deal with peer pressure and conflicts," Tomlin principal Susan Sullivan said. "And all of this effects the children's ability to learn."

The push to make students more empathetic is part of a 10-year effort within schools nationally to combat school violence and bullying, both physical and emotional. Many districts are turning to in-class and after-school empathy programs to build students' "emotional intelligence." The goal for many, in addition to curbing online taunts and fighting, is to create environments more open to learning.

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In Hillsborough, students at Metropolitan Ministries Partnership School, Potter Elementary School, Just Elementary and Booker T. Washington Elementary School learn to manage negative feelings, like fear and anger, and not act on impulse.

Students from Academy of the Holy Names, Berkeley Prep and seven other area public high schools volunteer at nonprofits to empathize with the elderly, poor and handicapped and build emotional and social skills.

And at a dozen elementary and middle schools across the district, girls train for a 5K race in part to develop a positive body image and learn healthy mental and physical tendencies.

Frameworks of Tampa Bay, a nonprofit that runs the empathy programs, says its intent is to curb violence by focusing on social skills and to teach how emotions can cloud decision-making.

"Since Columbine (High School massacre), we're seeing more and more students being treated disrespectfully, whether on the Internet, in text messages or to their face," said Robin Rose, Frameworks' chief executive officer. "It's frightening."

At Tomlin, the seventh-graders spend a day in group discussion and role playing to understand their emotions and identify similarities with one another. In one exercise, they're invited to act out sadness, anger or another emotion, then talk about how that emotion made others in the group feel. The aim is to show that emotions and attitudes can affect others.

In another exercise, the students view an illustration of an iceberg to show that, like people, there's more below the surface than on it. Echoing that point, the facilitators asked how many students live in single-parent homes because of divorce. That was followed with, how many felt angry or hurt by the situation?

The daylong More Than Me program started in October and runs every other week. It cost about \$15,000, which was split by a Frameworks grant, the school and Tomlin's Parent Teacher Student Association.

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Educators say empathy programs result in better grades and fewer instances of bullying and discipline problems. Likewise, parents and many students laud the efforts.

But critics argue schools are engaging in social engineering when the focus should be on academics. What once fell to parents and churches — teaching kindness and self-awareness — is becoming an unnecessary school responsibility.

"The most effective way to help children reduce aggression and be more open to other children is to develop a healthy home environment ... where values are taught," said Joy Pullmann, an education research fellow at the Heartland Institute, a conservative think tank in Chicago. "This needs to be dealt with at the root cause, at the family level."

Similarly, Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., cautioned that empathy programs can become so concerned that "everybody get along" that they stifle free expression.

Sullivan agreed families are the primary source for instilling values like empathy, but said the fact is that many kids from broken homes aren't receiving those lessons, which why schools are stepping in.

It's too early to tell whether More Than Me has boosted grade levels at Tomlin but bullying incidents and referral rates have "significantly" declined from this time last year among seventh-graders, according to Frameworks.

Complaints of cyberbullying are likewise down. And based on a one-page questionnaire of students who participated in the program, the school has seen a 59 percent increase in "empathy for others."

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Last year, Tomlin had students hear from Rachel's Challenge, an antibullying program named for Rachel Scott, the first student killed in the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado.

Sullivan praised the program but said she wanted something more interactive with students. She opted for More Then Me last summer after being introduced to it by Yvonne Fry, president of Tomlin's PTSA.

Priya Patel, 13, said she went through one of the first sessions in October. For her, she said, empathy means treating people the way she wants to be treated. Months after the program's debut, students are generally nicer to one another, she said, although incidents of "meanness and drama" still play out in school and online.

"That's going to happen everywhere, but (the program's) changed a lot of people's ways and point of view," Priya said. "Now, they don't look at people and judge them. There will never be one perfect school with no one who is mean, but you can always try to make it better."

Another student, Fabiola Avalos, 14, said she went through More Than Me in December. She got into a couple of fights last year as a sixth-grader based on comments or looks from classmates, but says her outlook changed when she learned that appearances don't always match reality — a More Than Me lesson.

"Last year, I wouldn't care and would start a fight," Fabiola said. "Other girls would look at you in a way and you think they're looking at you wrong, but they might be shy or going through a rough time. It may be how their lives are going at home. Now, I try not to judge others. You never know what they're going through."

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