

In September 2004 there had been 259 recorded incidents of challenging behaviour at Kingstanding Special School...one year later there were 48 recorded incidents...and by the beginning of this school year incidents were being recorded at less than 10 a year
...how has this dramatic reduction been achieved?

When Joy Hardwick arrived as the new Head of Kingstanding Special School almost two years ago, she was taken aback by the general behaviour of the students and by the extraordinarily high level of day-to-day aggression and even violence. Reading from the incident book you can see what she means. Two years ago 'slapping, kicking, scratching, punching and grabbing' were commonplace and every now and then there were more serious incidents between children and even attacks on staff. The staff were struggling to deal with a situation which was running out of control and the atmosphere in the school was tense and at times hostile.

And yet when I visited the school in December it felt entirely different. The school was welcoming and orderly. Whilst I was sitting waiting to meet Joy, staff and children took the trouble to greet me and to ask if I was being attended to. When I met Joy she described the difficulties the school was facing when she joined and she talked enthusiastically about the dramatic turnaround that had been achieved in the last two years. She was at pains to stress that it was a team effort and that the key to success was developing a shared vision and a common plan.

She went on to talk about how the introduction of Team-Teach had provided a framework that has enabled almost every aspect of the school to be reviewed and changed. I was aware that Team-Teach was a widely used approach but it was not until I discussed it with Joy and her staff that I began to see how powerful it can be. Joy showed me the Team-Teach manual (see details in box) and talked me through the process. Although Team-Teach has made an enormous difference, Joy stressed that any approach is only as good as the people that are using it. At Kingstanding she had to begin by winning the confidence of staff and of parents and children. The children at the school had many difficulties and barriers to contend with and all too often their frustrations were leading to conflict and violence. The important thing was for everyone to accept that 'something must be done' and for everyone to realise that they all had to work together to transform the situation.

“Team-Teach was the tool that helped us to develop a consistent way of dealing with all the incidents we faced each day and which gave us a common framework that we could all work to.”

“At the beginning I am sure there were many doubters,” added Joy, “but as we went on and as our work and determination began to pay off, then the whole thing gained momentum.”

Joy talked about the need to treat each and every child as a special individual and to plan carefully for their individual needs. She gave an example of how staff are encouraged to observe how a child appears when they arrive at school each day. Are they in a good mood? Or do they seem distracted or out-of-sorts? Are there signs of ill health or of anxiety? The intention is to make sure that staff are able to respond appropriately and to prevent any misunderstandings that might cause behaviour to deteriorate. At first this seemed a lot to ask but then I thought about how important it is to respond to others’ feelings in any social situation. And why shouldn’t children have the same level of respect that we offer family members or work colleagues?

Recently the school received the Gold Standard Award for Team-Teach. This prestigious level of recognition from the Team-Teach organisation has only been awarded twice before. Kingstanding Special School has become the first school in Birmingham and the West Midlands to achieve this gold standard and is only the third school in the U.K. to do so. The school recognises the work of its advanced level Team-Teach tutors in helping it achieve the award and offers outreach support so that others may also gain the benefit of the Team-Teach approach.

About Team-Teach

Team-Teach is a structured approach to working with young people that provides carers, including teachers, with a range of methods for managing difficult and challenging behaviours. Team-Teach is a holistic way of working that builds on the core values of a school and that has to be embraced by all stakeholders, including all teaching and support staff, parents and children, if it is to be effective.

Team-Teach was developed by a British educationalist, George Matthews, after he had spent a great deal of time researching different methods for managing aggression and violence in children and adults. His aim was to develop a programme that would allow the great majority of confrontational situations to be resolved without the need for physical intervention whilst equipping staff with ‘positive handling’ techniques that could be employed if necessary.

Team-Teach is used increasingly in schools and other services where staff have to work with young people with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. But the approach is applicable in any situation where conflict might arise.

The Team-Teach manual* explains how the approach is based on:

a spectrum of gradual and graded responses to reduce the probability of challenging behaviour escalating towards violence. The emphasis is always on preventative measures, defusing and de-escalation which should make up more than 95% of our responses. Where these approaches are insufficient there are risk-reduced interventions which form part of a holistic response. Research has shown that carers who are trained in physical techniques as part of a holistic approach are better at de-escalation than those trained in de-escalation skills alone. |

This latter point is crucial; in dealing with aggression, physical intervention should always be the last resort, but staff *who know how to intervene if all other options have failed* are more confident in managing the full range of situations they may face and are more able to take the heat out of all situations. The manual continues:

Interventions range from the least intrusive to the most restrictive. The least intrusive is often a verbal or visual prompt. Even in fight situations it is always recommended that the first response is a clear instruction to stop. When a physical intervention does prove necessary, that should never be the end of the matter.

In all conflict situations the important thing is not just to end the conflict but to go on to look at the cause of the conflict.

It is only by reviewing, questioning and changing our habitual responses that we can assist others to learn more effective ways of managing their own behaviour.

Team-Teach aims to provide staff with the tools to be *strong with their presence but gentle with their touch*. The programme starts from first principles by looking at the roots of aggression and by looking at how feelings of discomfort drive aggressive behaviour. It provides a 'tool box' of techniques for managing behaviour with specialist modules covering minimum risk interventions that go from responding to bites, punches and kicks through to dealing with attacks with knives or other weapons. The programme is about intervention followed by change and it stresses the importance of *repair, reflection and review*.

* 'Team-Teach Course Manual' 2003, Steaming Publishing. (0794 1234 077 or bernard@steaming-training.co.uk)

Fran Stevens

Team-Teach recently won the National Training Award

This level of award is presented to entries who have demonstrated exceptional achievement through training and development. The National Training Awards are the UK's number one accolade for businesses, organisations and individuals who have achieved lasting excellence and success through training and learning.

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