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The Online Healthy Relationships Project

Introduction

Our society is at war with itself. As public school teachers and administrators know, violence has become the path of least resistance when it comes to solving problems. Recently, a 14-year-old Halifax boy was suspended from school for carrying a sawed-off shotgun, and a 10-year-old Dartmouth girl came home with scratches on her face, chest and arms – compliments of the school bully.

The Online Healthy Relationships Project is an innovative approach to educating adolescents about the underlying issues that contribute to violent behaviour. Essentially a violence-prevention program, the object is to help students learn skills and attitudes needed to build healthy relationships based on sharing power with others. The initiative is a community partnership which derives its strength from the relationship among educators, police, the developers of an acclaimed violence-prevention curriculum and Internet technology specialists.

The Caledon Institute is collaborating with the National Crime Prevention Centre's Community Mobilization Program to create the Crime Prevention series. The goal of this series is to document initiatives that build safe communities. The series seeks to enhance public awareness of and support for community-based partnerships on crime prevention through social development.

This project is unique in that the traditional classroom delivery of the curriculum has been enhanced through the addition of customized online discussion groups which provide an important interactive component to the program. The initiative demonstrates that the existing curriculum can be improved by extending its reach beyond the classroom via Internet discussion forums and e-mail communication among students, teachers and police officers.

Project Beginnings

At the heart of this initiative is *Healthy Relationships: A Violence-Prevention Curriculum* developed by Men For Change of Halifax. Men For Change is a community group formed in 1989 in the aftermath of the tragic killing of 14 female students at *l'École Polytechnique* in Montreal. The group works proactively to reduce violence in society.

The curriculum was created by two classroom teachers and a freelance writer – all members of Men For Change – and was published in 1994. What differentiates this classroom program from most violence-prevention initiatives is that it was developed and written by men. As a result, a strong theme of men's accountability runs throughout the issues. The program teaches teens to cultivate emotional literacy and assertiveness, expose gender stereotypes and see the links between sexist attitudes and violent beha-



Sergeant Bill Cowper of the Halifax Regional Police (left) shows Ronelda MacDonald, a Grade 7 teacher, and Constable Rick Prescott (right) how to log into the Online Healthy Relationships Project website.

viour. Students also learn pro-social communication skills, develop media awareness and critical thinking skills, and work together to create fair and safe schools.

This project traces its beginnings to the spring of 1997. In an effort to bridge the gap between police and adolescents, Sergeant Bill Cowper of the Halifax Regional Police Department (known to his colleagues as ‘Sergeant Internet’) began looking for a way to involve police officers in the classroom. Bill conducted a global search of violence-prevention education materials on the Internet. Ironically, the curriculum which impressed him most turned out to have been developed in his own hometown.

At the Atlantic Crime Prevention Conference which took place in June 1997 in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, Bill met Andrew Safer, co-developer and author of the curriculum. Their conversation began the process that led to the launch of the Online Healthy Relationships pilot project a year and a half later.

When Bill shared the idea with Jane Thornley, Director of Research and Technology at the Halifax Regional School Board, she was immediately enthusiastic. Her commitment has driven the project ever

since. Jane and her staff are working to ensure that all students benefit from the use of modern communications technologies.

Because some of the schools in the Halifax Regional School Board are located outside the Halifax Regional Police’s jurisdiction, three RCMP detachments (Cole Harbour, Sheet Harbour and Tantallon) came on board to work with those schools.

Funding support from the Ottawa-based National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) enabled the three-month pilot project to proceed. The program was one of the first crime prevention projects in Canada to receive funding under the NCPC’s newly established Community Mobilization Program. This initiative of the federal Departments of Justice and Solicitor General is committed to supporting grass-roots collaborative approaches towards building safer communities.

The Nova Scotia Pilot

The Halifax Regional School Board sent out a memo to all of the junior high school principals in its jurisdiction, asking them to invite teachers to participate in the pilot phase. A broad cross-section of

teachers from different geographic areas and with expertise in a variety of subjects responded.

Two of the co-developers of *Healthy Relationships*, Roger Davies and Andrew Safer, conducted a two-day training session for the teachers, police officers and student support workers at Cole Harbour High in Dartmouth. On the second day, Sergeant Cowper and Ken Wallace of Sealevel Communications, a Halifax-based graphic design firm, conducted an Internet training session to show participants how to use the Online Healthy Relationships website.

Towards the end of 1998, 14 teachers, two student support workers and nine school liaison police officers taught a unit on 'Dealing with Aggression' from the *Healthy Relationships* curriculum in 11 junior and senior high schools in Halifax County.

This section of the curriculum teaches students to become more aware of their feelings and emotions, and shows them how to assertively communicate feelings such as frustration, rejection, irritation and hurt. This learning helps students begin to deal appropriately with difficult emotions as opposed to burying them and having them surface in anger. Topics include: The Emotions Wheel, Anatomy of Anger, Verifying Violence, Managing Stress, "I" Statements, Assert Yourself, Banish Bullying, WADE-IN and Negotiate, and A Cooperative Puzzle.

One teacher commented: "The students realized that police officers are human and trying to do their job well. They became more relaxed with the officer who visited the class and were very comfortable chatting with him in person and online."

The junior high school teachers presented the curriculum in Health, Family Studies, French Immersion and English classes, while in the high schools it was taught in Career and Life Management classes. The school liaison police officers came into the classroom once a month to talk to students about bullying, dealing with anger and negotiation strategies. Outside the classroom, the teacher, liaison officer and students discussed the material that had been presented

via their own private Internet discussion group. Two student support workers – one at each of the Halifax high schools – participated fully in the pilot project by playing the role of teacher assistant.

Online Interaction

The most challenging aspect of this initiative was the Internet component. The project partners set up a website dedicated to the Online Healthy Relationships Project (<http://hrc.ednet.ns.ca/>). Men For Change developed the content while Sealevel Communications created the website. EDnet of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture facilitated the programming required to set up the password-protected discussion groups.

Students, teachers and officers can enter their password-protected virtual classroom directly from the website's homepage. They select an activity that was presented in class and then browse a list of discussion-starter questions. When they want to share something with their classmates, they enter the discussion forum and post messages. All of the messages are vetted by a moderator (to screen out foul language and insults) and posted to the live message board where they are archived for their classmates to see.

The pilot program showed that, in future, the online component of the project will require additional support with regard to training and access to computers. However, teachers and officers who were in classrooms which enjoyed lively online discussions felt the additional communication enriched the students' learning. One Grade 7 teacher commented: "The quality of their online comments was amazing. They profited from having the chance to reflect upon the material presented in class and they seemed to like to 'talk' to me online. They nearly buried myself and our officer in e-mail!"

Student-Police Relations

Breaking down the hostility and mistrust between adolescents and police officers is a daunting

task, but there are indications that the pilot project was a step in the right direction. To our knowledge, this was the first time that school liaison police officers were involved in the classroom delivery of the *Healthy Relationships* curriculum. We were pleased to hear positive reports from both teachers and officers. Liaison officers who are in the schools on a full-time basis tended to have a rapport with the students already, but even they indicated that the online communication (particularly through personal e-mails) enhanced their understanding of the students' perspective. The officers who are only occasionally in the schools noticed an improvement in their relations with students over the pilot period.

A police officer explains: "By the end of December, I knew a lot of the students by their first name. Many approach me when I am on or off duty. The students' exposure to police officers allows them to explore police/student issues and clarify myths."

'Healthy Relationships' Struck a Chord

While the pilot project broke new ground with the Internet discussion groups and police involvement, the *Healthy Relationships* activities built on prior experience. By most accounts, teachers and student support workers felt that the students engaged in the material and benefitted from it. Asked to identify the outstanding competencies her students gained during the three-month program, one teacher pointed to the following lessons learned:

- anger is an acceptable emotion
- being assertive does not mean being aggressive
- explaining feelings is better than blaming or being angry
- bullies should not be allowed to intimidate victims
- there is a healthy way to handle angry feelings.

Teachers must understand that adolescents must be empowered to make the lessons 'their own.' The teachers who encouraged student participation

on a regular basis were the most successful in engaging the students in an exploration of the material.

The Next Step

The pilot showed us that the *Healthy Relationships* curriculum content, police involvement and Internet discussion groups together can create a powerful learning opportunity for adolescents. In our proposed three-year project, we will refine these elements by applying what we learned during the pilot phase.

We also plan to update the content of the curriculum, create a series of modules for comprehensive online training for teachers and police, strengthen collaborations and conduct remote pilots utilizing the enhanced online content and delivery system. Our objective is to offer globally the complete *Healthy Relationships* violence prevention program to all teachers, youth workers and police officers who have access to the World Wide Web.

By keeping the dynamic youth-teacher-officer interactions at the heart of the program, and enhancing their communications and the program's delivery via the Internet, we will strive to make *Healthy Relationships* available to the maximum number of youth in Canada and abroad.

Andrew Safer

Andrew Safer is co-developer and author of 'Healthy Relationships: A Violence Prevention Curriculum.'

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