

Building playtime communities

> With friendship seats

It is playtime. Lucy (aged 4½) is not feeling comfortable.

Lucy is new to school; she can see lots of children are playing, laughing — having fun. Not her. Her teacher has described her as ‘a bit of a loner; shy’. The children in her grade are polite to her — they are nice. It is different in the playground.

‘It’s a nice way for kids to acknowledge what it’s like to be without a friend.’

She notices the *friendship seat* underneath the peppercorn tree. It is a normal, bench seat painted green; just a different colour from the others. She had remembered her teacher saying to the class, ‘...if you feel alone in the playground and really want a friend to play with or talk to, go on and sit on the green seat under the big peppercorn tree.’

Lucy walks over, sits down and looks around feeling shy but hopeful. Lucy wants to play. Presently two children come over. She recognises Matthew from her class; he is with another ‘preppie’ girl, from another class.

‘Hello Lucy, want to come and play with us? We’re going down to the sandpit.’

The friendship seat

Many primary schools, and pre-schools, have utilised the concept of the friendship seat. On the first day of school class teachers have a class discussion about the playground; play equipment, play options, how to get teacher help if needed, the

need for water, sun awareness and so on. Students also learn about the friendship seat. Their teachers explains that if students are feeling lonely or want to play and are feeling shy they can go and sit on the friendship seat.

As one colleague (a principal) explains:

‘The friendship seat is a signal to other students to approach the student and ask them if they want to join in games or activities. There was a little boy sitting on the bench the other day looking really sad. Some older kids came up to him and asked him to play. It’s a nice way for kids to acknowledge what it’s like to be without a friend.’

One of her students adds, ‘Some kids are new at school and they haven’t got any friends, so they sit on the bench and wait for a friend.’

At another school they placed a little sign next to their friendship seat (the ‘friend stop’). Teachers added a proviso that, ‘as soon as there are two of you on the bench you can go and play together’.

Whole-School approach

It is surprising how such a basic concept works so well. The director of the Francis Sullivan Pre-School in Brooklyn (Victoria) notes that in the establishment phase of the year they discussed the making of friends — with all the children. This discussion included the wide range of play options and activities and ‘what to do when you have no-one to play with’.

As a feature of their whole-school approach to behaviour and social



interaction they introduce the ‘friendship place’ complete with a sign that says ‘Friendships made here’. This sign is used to ‘telegraph to other children that their classmate wants someone to play with’.

The teachers then modelled how this works and practised it a few times together as a class group. ‘It has really proved a really useful aspect to our play program. We’ve watched children stand by the sign and pretty soon another child (or two) will go over and take them off ... some children actually give the student waiting in the friendship place a hug before they go off to play,’ one member of staff said.

Positive social interaction

Any approach to positive social interaction and constructive play has to include a wide range of activities for children to choose from at playtimes. Not all children want

to run, jump and skip at playtime. Some are happy with quiet, relaxing activities including role-play, drawing, board games or simply chatting.

Discussing this issue with students can lend itself to many playground initiatives including a ‘role-play house’ (a small playhouse) ‘to make up plays and stories in and out of our playhouse’; a chalking area (for would-be pavement artists!); a quiet games area for board games, drawing and colouring activities; a beanbag netball area (beanbags do not bounce all over the place as they still develop the netball skill); a car track area with a large vinyl mat with roads painted on and a range of cars, trucks and figures.

Play helpers

Play-helpers are a value added component to the friendship seat. Play-helpers work in pairs, and roam the playground offering

help and support to children. They wear a sash (across their chest) to signal their role. They also assist the students who monitor use and pack-up of play equipment.

‘The key, though, is to plan for positive social play as much as possible.’

Some schools also have a ‘pupil-shepherding’ program. Older students are invited (and trained) to work with younger students, to introduce them to the large playground space, the noise, the bustle, the play equipment, the toilets, the drinking fountain and how to negotiate the ebb and flow of social space. This shepherding allows that early confidence and assurance that some young children need as they start

school and learn to relate to their new world.

Policy

Like any whole-school approach, a playground policy has to clarify the rules and routines and — when necessary — the consequences of thoughtless and unsafe behaviour. The key, though, is to plan for positive social play as much as possible.

The friendship seat is a small — but positive — feature of such a policy. As one principal notes: ‘the friendship seat is used mostly in the establishment phase of the year and not just by infants. Sometimes teachers will sit and chat or counsel a student on the seat under the tree. It’s about enabling students to be more consciously human’. <

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