

(An excerpt from Classrooms That Work: A Teacher's Guide to Discipline Without Stress)

Problem solving & conflict resolution

Role Playing

Role playing consists of actually acting out a little scenario in front of the class that depicts the essential aspects of a problem that a student is having, or that two or more students are having with one another. This method is used when discussing the problem has not turned out to be helpful. For example, sometimes young or shy children, children from different cultures, or children who have suffered emotional trauma, may not be able to express themselves well. These children may benefit from role playing, because they can act out their feelings better than they can verbalize them. Acting out the problem allows them to visualize it, to analyze their feelings and the feelings of others, and to then find a solution.

When a child plays a role, he enters into the world of another person. This is a growth experience because it helps him feel and understand the emotions of others. It is excellent training in the development of empathy and compassion for others. It also gives the child a chance to hear other points of view. The wonderful thing about this experience is that they learn in an atmosphere of safety – it's not a real situation, so they can experiment more without having to take psychological risks.

Role playing also lays bare the motivations behind various misbehaviors. If a child acts out the part of a bully, she then has insight into how a bully feels and why he might be doing it, while the bully who is watching can also have insight into his own actions.

Problems that can be played out

Young children:

- dealing with older kids in the playground
- older siblings at home
- threatening animals
- problems with adults
- making friends
- inviting someone to play
- confronting someone with an "I" message

Children aged 6-12:

- misbehavior in class
- being bullied

- being teased
- being excluded
- being ganged up on
- being called names

Teens:

- being excluded from a clique
- being ostracized
- being belittled
- saying “no” to unacceptable requests
- dating
- dealing with intimate relationships
- difficulties with the teacher
- gang-related problems
- interruptions in class

The ten steps of role playing

1. Talk about the problem you are going to be role playing.
2. Make sure the class really wants to act out the situation, otherwise it will be hard to find volunteers.
3. Choose the participants, preferably those who have volunteered. Avoid choosing students that were volunteered or nominated by others.
4. Start immediately. Don't talk too much about the situation or the group will lose spontaneity.
5. Make sure each person knows the role he is to play. Name tags for the role such as "brother" "teacher" etc., are helpful. Props help but are not necessary because students easily jump into their roles.
6. Prepare the class for what to observe and how to look for it (the behavior, the goals, and the motivation). First let the participants act out the problem, then let the class analyze the solution verbally. Lastly, let the participants act out the solution.
7. Give encouragement and assistance only when needed, otherwise let them be spontaneous. Don't let it go too long.
8. As soon as the problem is clear, stop the action. Have the participants stay where they are so that people can clearly visualize the problem.
9. Discuss the feelings of each participant in the play. The observers can then make their comments and evaluations. How did it start? What was the misunderstanding? Which role was responsible for the problem? What could have been done? What should be done now? What was the purpose of the behavior of the person causing the problem?
10. Using the same or different actors, reenact the scene again, but this time with a solution or even many different solutions. Get the feelings of the actors and the group as to whether the solutions will work. Encourage everyone to try new ideas. Ask them to report about the problem at the next class meeting.

Role Playing Nuts and Bolts

The role-playing cast should be selected by the teacher to avoid students volunteering others in order to humiliate them. Cast against type. For example, don't cast the bully in the bully role. Select the main character first so that the others can see how the role they volunteer for relates to the main character. Make the selections quickly so that the action can start immediately.

Role playing is fun, but the teacher has to make an effort to keep the class on track and their sights on the problem enacted. If anyone is acting inappropriately or silly, remove the child and find another actor. The child can be returned for the solution if he is ready to participate seriously. Of course, children will laugh at certain funny situations being enacted.

There are two acts to our role playing. The first act is always about the problem, the second, about the solution, or the many different solutions, to that problem. As soon as the problem is clearly stated and understood through the play, the teacher can stop the action. (This can take less than a minute but should not be more than a few minutes long.) Talk about possible reasons why the problem happened and then discuss various solutions. Then, reenact the problem with different solutions.

© 2007 Classrooms That Work, All Rights Reserved. Reproduction or redistribution is prohibited without the express written consent of the Stan Shapiro, M.A. & Karen Skinulis