

Edithvale Primary School

Presenter: Kerri Harridge - Wellbeing Leader and Year 2 Classroom Teacher

Kerri took on the role of Wellbeing Leader this year and was involved in training via DET focused on the Respectful Relationships resources for schools which incorporated learning led by Paul Zappa of Jesuit Social Services around The Man Box - Healthier Masculinities in Schools.

Subsequent to training undertaken, Kerri ran a school wide professional development session for staff centred on Respectful Relationships and The Man Box. She created a case study for staff to engage with and asked them to identify points of intervention where teachers could have stepped in to help change the trajectory, messaging and engagement with a young boy in his primary school years.

A baby boy is born. He is the second child to his parents aged 30 and 32 years. His sister is 21 months older than him. The boy grows. He is very cuddly and affectionate but also very busy and active. He is very close to his sister until the age of 3 and 4 when he becomes obsessed with sport, particularly ball sports, so much so that he stops playing dress ups, playing with dolls, drawing, enjoying books and creating like his sister loves to do. At kinder he is drawn to the 'sporty' boys. He is always outside kicking the footy and running around. His teacher finds it difficult at times to harness his high energy levels.

He starts school and the adjustment is huge. He attends a primary school without his 5 best buddies who have all chosen to go to a different neighbourhood school. He finds it hard to not run around whenever he wants but he is very switched on to learning and shows a particular fascination with Maths. In grade 1 he finds a girl and they quickly become the best of friends. She gets called a tomboy. They challenge each other academically and spend a lot of time together playing sport, on play dates and having sleepovers at each other's houses.

By Year 3, it's not so socially acceptable for the boy to have a female best mate. They are drawn apart by their peers, due to put downs, negative comments and peer pressure. The boy is excelling academically and wears his emotions close to the surface however at school these normally manifest as anger and frustration because he sees them as more appropriate for a boy to express. He has a big personality, loves contributing to class discussions and helping others but this masks his low self esteem and how hard he is on himself. He is hugely empathic, particularly towards his friends and will do anything to for them, sometimes to his own detriment.

In Year 4 he doesn't gel with his teachers and he has particular trouble with another male classmate. He uses language that he has heard from others that hurts some feelings and creates problems. When confronted he goes into fight mode as he feels as though he is the only one accused and reprimanded and he has to 'save face'. He feels like he is always in trouble but doesn't want to seem weak so tries to take it on the chin and not tell others or share his struggles. He gets into a few disagreements in the yard and a Behaviour Support Plan is developed.

In Year 5, he starts with a fresh slate and is really keen to begin with his new teacher. However, after his teacher goes on paternity leave, something changes. He is branded too talkative, disrespectful and told that he does not demonstrate persistence in learning or the ability to apologise when he's confronted. He seeks approval from his peers because he feels his teachers have given up on him and don't care. In discussion with the school, his parents are told he has been using derogatory language towards women and that they are concerned about the 'wolf pack' he is a part of. His parents educate him about his derogatory comments and discuss why the language is so detrimental and how they will work together to help him. The school asks that the family address the language behind closed doors with no wider discussions at school. His family continues to talk with him about his language and interactions with his mates. The parents of his friends and his own parents discuss the language being used together and try to keep their kids accountable. The school are not aware of these conversations. The year continues and the family is finally called in for a meeting late in Term 3. The school describes the boy's behaviour as antisocial and disrespectful yet ask the family to discuss this with him themselves. They also say that he is unwilling to apologise and take responsibility after incidents despite the family sharing that this is very difficult for him due to his low self esteem that he has sought ongoing psychology to assist with.

The boy has been placed and placed himself in a Man Box. He has conformed to gendered stereotypes of being strong, not weak, to fight rather than back down, to lead rather than follow, to be hard, not soft. But this all masks who he really is: sensitive, caring, empathic and helpful.

The Good News: In Year 6 his situation turns around. He has a teacher who gets to know him inside out. She communicates with his parents regularly and know how he ticks. She provides a safe place for him to be his true self - honest, vulnerable, kind and to share how he really feels. She unpacks stories with him around social justice and difference and his thinking and behaviour completely changes. She makes him accountable for the words that he says and the behaviours he exhibits. She works closely with his parents and helps him find a way out of his Man Box. He holds his head high ALL year and finishes his primary school journey a calm, caring, settled and confident young man.

What Has Happened Since?

Actions:

- ▶ All staff prioritising conversations and opening dialogue when we hear or are made aware of gender based comments or behaviour. Gender based conversations are frequent with classes intentionally ensuring students are undertaking tasks in mixed gender groupings.
- ▶ Changes made to the way incidents are reported via COMPASS with all gender based concerns elevated to leadership in addition to classroom teachers.
- ▶ Ensuring all classes throughout the school are focusing on Topic 7: Gender and Identity and Topic 8: Positive Gender Relations in Term 4 of the Respectful Relationships resources as we transition back onsite with all the challenges this brings.
- ▶ Refining and rewriting the school values with all staff, students and parents consulted and involved in their redevelopment
- ▶ Reassessment and rewriting of the school Wellbeing and Engagement Policy and Inclusion and Diversity Policy
- ▶ Partnerships with other schools have been cultivated with resource sharing and opportunity to collaborate on the development and implementation of Wellbeing sessions and programs.
- ▶ Permission has been given for the case study to be used in undergraduate teacher training at Deakin University with regard to student wellbeing and Respectful Relationships resource use.