

Catching Kids Before They Fall

By Pamella Hays and Carrie Thiel

Someone once said education should not be understood as filling a bucket, but rather as lighting a fire. All good teachers know this instinctively; everything they do contributes to this goal of helping students find their own learning center—their metacognitive self—and begin taking ownership of their own “fire.” *Catching Kids Before They Fall* is an emotional literacy curriculum for high school students which has the same goal of self-awareness through learning that Project CRISS® has, but our curriculum simply approaches that goal through the teaching of emotional and social skills rather than the more traditional academic process.

This curriculum was created by Carrie Thiel and Pam Hays. While teaching at Kalispell Junior High School in Kalispell, Montana, we devised the curriculum in response to the needs of troubled young people who were students in our alternative English class. It became apparent to us that many of our students were so deficient in emotional and social skills it was difficult for them to respond successfully to their academic responsibilities. Teenagers from non-supportive home environments often carry a great deal of anger and confusion about who they are; the resulting low self-esteem and distrust can be expressed by either aggressive behavior (the “discipline problem” student in your class) or by passive withdrawal (the student who seldom participates, has few friends, and seems unreachable academically). Our goal as teachers was to try to connect with these students through a social and emotional skills curriculum so eventually they would find their stride in academic classes and cope more responsibly with the school’s expectations. CRISS teachers would feel at home with the basic teaching/learning strategies in our curriculum. We have already mentioned the importance of metacognition in our program, a concept which is one of the founding principles of Project CRISS. There is no more powerful form of metacognition than the emotional one; our curriculum addresses this in a variety of ways. We constantly draw on our students’ emotional and social background, evoking first the positive (for example, what ingredients make a healthy family), but utilizing, as well, these students’ realistic understanding of their world, which is often quite dysfunctional. We help students objectively examine their own reality through our presentation of basic emotional and social skills, such as managing anger. In addition, through the use of personal strategies—journaling, reaction responses, and creative projects—students begin to form an awareness of how their background knowledge affects their behavior. All of the learning strategies in our curriculum reflect the CRISS concept of active learning. From role playing to group art projects (Picture Notes and murals), to kinesthetic exercises, to reflecting on the core ideas of the curriculum through drawing and writing about symbols, to Circle and partner activities, we utilize many of the same fundamental ideas that CRISS has pioneered.

The additional ingredient in an emotional literacy class not found in most traditional academic classes is *community*. We carefully and consciously built our class into a community. As trust increased, students shed their attitudes of self-doubt and indifference and began to connect both with us and with their peers. This curriculum, as its title implies, is preventative and pro-active; when students learn to moderate their own behavior and attitudes, they can be “caught before they fall,” thus avoiding failure, dropping out, or expulsion.

Additionally, our curriculum emphasizes the concepts of making healthy choices, being aware of and working toward one’s life dream, and finding within oneself the potential for being heroic. Students always responded enthusiastically to the idea of universal human longings, what we called “the essential needs of the human heart,” needs which we all share. Gradually, we began to see students open up to life’s challenges and to the power of finding one’s purpose.

As a grant-funded program, our alternative ninth grade school, NorthStar (which employed *Catching Kids Before They Fall*), was required to submit statistics affirming students’ progress. In the first three years of the program, a comparison of our students’ eighth grade and ninth grade records showed attendance increased by 47%; GPA increased by .78 points; over 80% of all ninth grade NorthStar students went on to institutions of higher education; each quarter, from two to six students made the honor roll, and some individual students increased their grade points by as much as 2.5 points. In addition, discipline referrals for our students decreased and none of our students was expelled. While our emotional literacy curriculum was only a part of that program, we have testimony from students supporting its positive and far-reaching effects on their lives, both at school and in the world. Thus, we will not end this article with our voices, but with the voice of one of our students.

“I know what direction I want my life to go and how to change for the better. It is surprising how much knowledge [this class] has given me, and all of it can be put to everyday use.” Here is the voice of a student who has achieved the true goal of learning—self-awareness—and her fire will burn brightly for a very long time.

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