



Helping parents to help kids at St Simon Peter School

Linking home and school

Perth's St. Simon Peter Catholic Primary School is passionate about mental health and wellbeing – for the whole community. With a school motto of "Love One Another" and a philosophy that a well-rounded individual can only be achieved through a team effort from the child, the parents and the school, becoming a KidsMatter school seemed the next logical step. "We were already doing good things in pastoral care and we thought KidsMatter would be a great opportunity to put all the bits under one umbrella," Principal Richard Cavanagh said.

Coupled with a positive teacher group and an innovative and committed Parent Action Team, Richard says the implementation has gone well. "The KidsMatter philosophy greatly complements our philosophy that the home and the school are closely linked. Linking the four components of KidsMatter has enabled us to offer something really special to the kids and has helped us to focus on *Social and Emotional Learning* with a view to helping parents assist each other," Richard added.

With 800 students representing almost 550 families (200 of which are remarried or single parent families), the seven-member Parent Action Team makes an enormous job look easy. One of the founders of the Parent Action Team, Lisa Yates, said she was motivated to act for very personal reasons. "When my husband and I separated, I become very concerned about the emotional wellbeing of my son. I discussed this with his teacher at the time and she looked at me blankly. I realised this was an area that we needed more information on and was inspired to try and get some other parents to help the school implement KidsMatter," Lisa said.

A notice was put in the school newsletter calling for interested parents to become part of KidsMatter, which led to the formation of the team. Current members are also motivated by personal reasons such as long-term experiences of bullying, family members with a mental illness and associated stigma or concerns about a child who is "not fitting in".

"Our primary goal is to get a free flow of information to and from parents – to help boost parents' confidence to come and talk to teachers about any mental health concerns they may have," Lisa said.

Small things can make a big difference

The Parent Action Team has been a whirlwind of activity since it began focusing on implementing Component 3 – *Parenting Support and Education*. It has produced an information trolley, which is a mobile resource centre full of brochures from health and local agencies. It is located in various sites across the school. "We might have it outside a classroom or after an assembly. We target the parents when they are picking up and dropping off the kids," Lisa said.

The team also produces a regular four-page KidsMatter newsletter with links to mental health websites and the KidsMatter site. Local agencies have been invited to the school to meet the Parent Action Team and the staff team to form relationships and share information. There are KidsMatter posters around the school and plans for parent coffee mornings. The school's website also has information on KidsMatter at the parents' request.

In September 2007, Lisa Yates and team member Tanya Ryan were asked to present in Adelaide to representatives from fifty Round 2 KidsMatter schools and share their experiences. "I find it really challenging talking in front of so many people but so motivating," Tanya said. "It really concreted my commitment to the project and made me realise how small things can make a big difference."

WA KidsMatter Project Officer, Cate Engelbrecht, said the school's presentation has had far-reaching effects. "Tanya and Lisa's presentation was very inspiring as they were so open and honest about their experiences as parents, which would not have been easy in front of 200 people. They are so modest and their involvement has had a great impact on the project. They have inspired schools to see parents as a huge untapped resource which is essential in helping promote the health of children," Cate said.

The school has adopted the You Can Do It educational program, which aims to provide children with the foundations for social and emotional wellbeing now and in the future. The program focuses on the five keys of: Confidence, Persistence, Organisation, Getting Along and Resilience. Each week the entire school meets for a half-hour pastoral care session. This whole-of-school-commitment is seen as an essential part of every child's development. In 2008, the session will encompass components of the You Can Do It program.

Speaking a common language

Principal Richard Cavanagh said KidsMatter has enabled the school to speak a common language and develop a new shared culture. "We now have a common vision of what we want to achieve. We are now planning and timetabling for key people to meet regularly because of KidsMatter. We continually refer to KidsMatter as the vehicle we use when issues come up. The early intervention has enabled us to work with families and children in a way that prevents little things from becoming bigger," Richard said.

Teachers, too, are feeling the benefits of new ways of working with parents. A professional development session with teachers and parents early during the implementation phase revealed that both groups were "terrified" of each other – a revelation that led to more open communication.

KidsMatter Coordinator for the school, Fiona Brady, said KidsMatter has been a great conduit for forging partnerships. "Connections between parents, community and staff are a lot stronger and this will only increase as we encourage parents to become part of the school community and part of their children's learning," she said.

And, Fiona added, getting mental health issues out in the open has benefited many. "I feel that talking more about mental health has reduced the stigma. Staff are more willing to talk about these issues instead of ignoring things that we shouldn't have. I feel much more equipped to speak to someone about mental health and wellbeing issues now," Fiona said.

The school has had a student counsellor for a number of years, but from 2008, a two-day-a-week family counsellor will liaise with the Parent Action Team, building another key partnership.

Open communication and a shared purpose

With a philosophy that has been maintained for many years, and under the guidance of a principal who encourages trust and confidence, St. Simon Peter exemplifies what can be achieved through open communication and a shared purpose.

"It was important for us as a school to make sure staff didn't see the implementation of KidsMatter across the school as extra work. KidsMatter is part of personal development and is essential to our development as human beings," Richard said.



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