



Family Links

Family Links and Special Educational Needs



Maeve Duckmanton is Assistant Head teacher at the John Watson School for children with special needs in Wheatley, Oxfordshire. She has worked with children with special needs for twelve years.

John Watson School took part in Family Links school training in 2004 and Maeve now leads Parent groups in the school.

“ The Nurturing Programme totally reinforces everything that I do. It provided lots more ideas and strategies to support me in developing relationships with pupils and help them to understand their feelings and actions. Whilst my relationship with [the students] was good before, the difference now is that I'm more

skilled at talking about feelings and so are they. It doesn't mean that I wasn't empathic before, but I'm much more so now because I know the real value of what comes back when you give that response. It's really honed my skills I think.

As a teacher, I've always tried to make my relationship with parents as successful as I possibly can and have worked hard at that. I think that they trust me. There was a respect that was there anyway, but I think the Parenting Programme really brought me closer to some parents. I was the only member of my first Parent Group who didn't have a child with special needs. I did feel very privileged to be there and to be accepted within that group.

Personal Response

I've really enjoyed the training and I've got so much from it. Personally I feel it's made me a more effective communicator. I have found that empathy is a much better way of responding to people who are having a difficult time. I use 'I' statements with my family as well.

My daughter is eleven, we've always got on brilliantly but for the first time ever she snapped at me. I was letting it fester inside me, then I thought, no I'm just going to have to tell her how I'm feeling. If I hadn't had that training in the Programme, what I probably would have done is not talk to her for the rest of the day. I used an 'I' statement and she said sorry straight away. I felt much better for saying it and she knew how I felt and that was what I wanted her to know.

She apologised immediately. Using 'I' statements was much better than if I'd have gone in with some sort of challenging or defensive type of statement. Using 'I' statements gives the response that you would hope for.

Feedback

The parent feedback from the first group was really good. For one parent it's only her and her daughter, who has quite profound learning difficulties. It was hard for her. For instance, using the family reward chart was difficult because her daughter wouldn't ever be able to give her Mum a reward. But

I believe that particular Mum had a boost to her self-esteem during the course and she said it was a really positive experience for her.

One of the parents at the end of the Programme said “I’ve finally accepted my child as he is and actually I’m much happier now than I was before.” As a result of the Nurturing Programme that’s huge!

I think that the Parent Programme is so well planned. You can clearly see where the progression comes from and when you’re delivering it you can see that it’s such a well-written programme.

Useful Techniques

Time out, choices and consequences, empathy and ignoring – as long as everybody is consistent. Consistency is the most important thing that needs to happen in schools, also that the Management Team understands how the Programme works and backs everything up.

Ignoring is brilliant – in the right time and place. So much harder for a parent to do though I think, as a teacher I’m not as emotionally attached to the children. I can clearly see why it’s left until the end of the Programme to introduce.

Effects of the Programme

Before we had training in the Nurturing Programme at John Watson School, I was working with a student who wouldn’t follow instructions and was showing extremely controlling behaviour. I spoke to Debbie, the teacher who had introduced us to the Programme, and she said to give him lots and lots of praise, which was exactly what none of us felt like doing! I persuaded my staff that we should all try to do it and at the end of three months he was compliant, he was joining in and the lovely person we hoped was in there was able to come out.

I think the biggest thing is the empathic response. Both with parents and with colleagues – it’s amazing how supported people feel by receiving an empathic comment or gesture. They have really appreciated receiving that time just to listen. I would’ve given it anyway, except that I’m conscious that my use of empathy is stronger than it would’ve been naturally. I have a heightened awareness of it really.

I’ve experienced it personally and professionally and I just think even if you only take up one thing from the whole Programme, that one thing is going to make a difference in your life.

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