

PLAYING TOGETHER

By Wilson McCaskill

I am often asked why I believe the best way for a school to utilise the PLAY IS THE WAY® program is to have the whole school playing at the same time, preferably in the morning.

The frequency of the question made me think that putting my reasons into a newsletter would be of interest to a greater number of people than I am likely aware of.

Let me start with what evidence indicates. Schools that do run the games program as the first item of the day report that absenteeism reduces and punctuality increases. It appears students like starting the day with play and don't want to miss out.

Starting with play allows students who need it, the opportunity to get their heads into the right space for the main learning period of the day. Teachers report that it gives them the chance to "read" the state of their class or individuals in the class and address issues of concern before starting classwork.

There are some teachers who don't like going out to play games first thing, especially in winter and would prefer to do it at a warmer time in the day. Interestingly this is not, in my experience, a common complaint of children. Others have suggested that they are not in the right "headspace" to be observant and energetic first thing in the morning and are less able to deal with behaviour issues rationally.

A whole school, simultaneous use of the program makes teachers more accountable. A class missing a session is noticeable and those not playing the required games stand out by contrast. Playing simultaneously also means classes are more likely to play for the required amount of time.

Some teachers will enjoy the professional demand a whole school approach places on them; others may find it an imposition. Many will enjoy the collegiate team spirit the process often fosters.

Quite a few teachers have concerns about the games getting children too excited, making it hard for them to settle and work effectively when back in the classroom.

My answer to this is:

1. Children need to learn to change gears. Going from one state to another is a necessary skill in life and learning. Changing from one mode of behaviour to another (code switching) is something that can be taught and takes practise.
2. It is always possible to hold a game or activity in the last few minutes of a session that winds children down, not up.
3. Children need to be made aware of the following: “You earn the privilege of going up (getting excited) by demonstrating the skill of coming down (settling down).” Children need to know the teacher is more than willing to let them get really excited provided they can change gears and settle. The more skillful they get at changing gears the more willing the teacher is to let them get excited. Without that skill teachers have no option but to keep a lid on everything – which they don’t enjoy and neither do the students.
4. Code switching gets better with practice and the skill of self-regulation only gets better when regulation is tested not avoided.

Getting children active first thing is good for their brains. It oxygenates their blood and has them thinking, cooperating and participating in preparation for doing the same in the classroom. If nothing else it well and truly shakes off sleepiness.

Those are the obvious answers and the main downsides to starting first thing in the morning tend to be issues related to the teachers more than the students.

Less obvious are the fears some teachers have of their own “performance” and their classroom behaviour being exposed to fellow staff. This is far more prevalent in schools where teachers have their own separate classroom closed off from the scrutiny or observation of others.

In schools where classrooms are in an open, shared space with several classes in that space and all within sight and hearing of each other, teachers are used to being in view and are less defensive. Teachers in this style of school adapt to everyone playing at the same time with relative ease and little sense of threat.

Not all schools have the necessary camaraderie and sense of safety and mutual support that removes the fear of comparison and judgement. Sadly, too many teachers feel sufficiently unsure of the motives of their colleagues to risk exposing themselves or their class to the view of others.

However, in schools open and confident enough to have classrooms playing together the opportunity to indirectly learn from each other is captured and the sense of a common purpose with equal and common commitment much easier to cultivate.

On occasion, the lack of space makes it impossible for the whole school to play at the same time. Usually this is resolved by breaking the school into groups that come out to play at separate times.

One benefit of this system is the need for less equipment. A downside can be the noise created by the playing groups especially if there is no way of avoiding playing new classrooms.

A very important but often not thought about reason for playing at the same time is it helps to establish, define and make visible a “positive school community.”

It is generally accepted that a positive school community with a commitment to social and emotional learning contributes significantly to the mental health and wellbeing of students. I can't think of a better device to create that positive community than by getting the community to play together.

After all, play is the universal language of children and when all the children of a given community irrespective of their race, colour or creed are playing at the same time, a common language is being spoken with many levels of meaning transmitted and received.

There is something uplifting about the sight and sound of children playing, both for the participants themselves and the observers. Perhaps it's the sense of celebration inherent in play - a celebration of innocence and simple pleasures, of unfettered exuberance, of acceptance, generosity and a tactile, sensory appreciation of the world. Perhaps it just says all can be well with the world and offers hope.

Whatever it is, people like to watch children playing. Be it in large numbers in parks, schoolyards and sports fields or just a handful of children running around the backyard, playing seems to touch a soft spot deep within all of us.

The beauty of starting the day with community play is that it kicks the school day off with a celebration, an honouring of childhood.

In my experience, children love streaming out of their classrooms together and playing at the same time. They especially love it if they can play where others are playing. Little children like to look across to big

children playing the same game or a variation. Older children are often softened and kinder to each other when playing in the vicinity of those younger who look up to them. Children seem to get the deeper messages of the experience. They don't articulate them but they get it and they like it.

The hard part is convincing adults that 20 minutes playing as a whole school, 3 or 4 times a week is worth it. That spending that amount of time collectively and simultaneously working on the social and emotional development of the school community is not a poor use of time but is a powerful way to create and maintain a positive school community.

"Community" is a fascinating concept. Often used to define any body of people within classrooms, schools, suburbs, towns as well as ethnic groups, religious groups, artists, musicians and others that can be delineated and defined, its use often implies something deeper than the obviousness of what it describes.

To me, it's a little like charisma. Just as you can't miss it when someone's got it you know when a community's got community and when it hasn't.

So it is with schools. If you belong to a school with a real sense of community you know it. It's everywhere. In every classroom, the staff room, the playground, the canteen, even the gardener and the grounds have got it. It's there, everywhere, all of the time.

As a visitor, your awareness of it is created by what you see, hear and sense. It doesn't take long to know if the school has community and if it has, its students are being enriched well beyond the benefits of structured learning.

Schools are the hubs of the communities they service and can affect positive change on a multitude of levels. I believe creating and maintaining a positive school community to be a school leaders most important task. I also believe that establishing a regular, whole school program of developmental games is a good way to achieve this.

Is it crucial that the PLAY IS THE WAY® program be played en masse and first thing in the morning? Not at all. The program can be employed in a variety of ways and significant improvements in positive social behaviour expected, provided children are participating in the program for a minimum of 60 minutes per week.

It may be wise to question a whole school, simultaneous playing of games if some teachers are opposed to the idea and unable to put their opposition aside to facilitate their games sessions with professionalism, interest and energy.

Students deserve teachers who are motivated and involved. Participating in a games session facilitated by a reluctant or resentful teacher is a bit like eating in a quality restaurant with poor service—great food, spoiled by the taste of disappointment and frustration.

I can't help thinking that developmental games will struggle for their rightful place in the core business of school while educators continue to address behaviour from the perspective of management not education. When the mind shift happens and behaviour management is universally replaced by behaviour education, the time taken to gather together and nurture the skills of positive social behaviour will be seen as a wise investment in developing a fundamental necessity for children – *a positive school community*.