



Re-embedding The Life Raft Concepts

By Wilson McCaskill

The Play Is The Way® (PITW) Life Raft concepts serve as an effective moral compass provided they have been adequately explored, understood and embedded. The aim of course is to make the expression of each concept an entrenched, lifelong habit of behaviour. A reflexive filtering of words and actions through the requirements of the Life Raft concepts will ensure a child does not drown in the often-turbulent waters of life and learning.

Moral development accelerates in the primary school years (ages 5 to 12) and is almost complete by the age of 15. That being so, primary school is the perfect window for building a robust compass that will steadfastly guide students in their pursuit of lives well lived.

Much as we may know that self-control is the most important social and emotional competency; helping children develop that capacity in a vast variety of circumstances is challenging. A meaningful, age appropriate exploration of each concept and their links to each other, with ongoing assessment of how they manifest in both words and actions, as well as their influence on relationships and interactions, helps students strengthen self-control and deepens empathy.

A common mistake is to think that once explored the concepts need not be investigated again. Understanding that a 5 year old will percolate the meaning of each concept through the filter of his or her perception of the world and life experience before arriving at an understanding he or she can relate to and action; it would be wise for teachers to regularly revisit the Life Raft concepts to deepen the understanding and further each concepts influence on student behaviour.

For better or worse a child's personal circumstances can change their belief in and acceptance of a concept.

For example:

In years 2 and 3 Robert was the model of being brave and stepping into the unknown. Now in year 4 and still not particularly sporty with an ever-growing interest in the arts, Robert has recognized that each time he faces his fears in sport he simultaneously improves his ability to put himself "out there" in drama and dance. He has also noticed of late that he is increasingly able to work effectively with children of lesser ability and is less concerned about being in the best group and more interested in helping everyone do their best. He is enjoying school and if you asked him what he likes most about his school he would very likely answer, "Everyone here treats everybody the way they want to be treated."



Fast-forward six months.

Eight weeks ago Robert's mother, who has been raising Robert single handedly since he was four years old, carefully informed him that she had met a man she liked and that sometime in the future she would like Robert to meet Greg. After four weeks of gently introducing Greg into conversations and sharing some of her thoughts and feelings about him, Robert's Mum felt that he knew enough about Greg to plan a meeting at the local park.

When the day came, Mum expressed her hope that Robert would like Greg and they would all get along and have a fun afternoon. Robert felt anxious but couldn't put his finger on why and although he would have preferred not to meet Greg, he smiled because he sensed his Mum was even more nervous than he was.

The meeting was awkward. Greg didn't say much and neither did Robert and Mum tried too hard to keep things light and happy. Robert felt Greg didn't like him and deduced that had he been better at kicking and marking the ball, Greg had given him as a present, things would have gone better.

The outing ended sooner than expected and once Robert was in the car Greg gave Mum a kiss, which he thought Robert wouldn't notice. But he did and knowing that he wasn't meant to see it made the kiss feel much worse. Robert hoped his Mum would just get in the car and drive home without saying anything. She didn't, and once again tried too hard to keep things light and happy. By the time they got home Robert knew that, like it or not, he was going to be seeing a lot more of Greg.

A slow and difficult month passed and Greg steadily increased the amount of time he spent in Robert and his Mum's house. Some nights Greg didn't go home and Robert would wake to see him eating breakfast with his Mum, which stirred feelings he found troubling and uncomfortable.

If Robert could describe how Greg made him feel he would say inadequate, insecure and weak. If he could tell you how Greg did this he would say, by constantly highlighting his lack of physical skills and badgering him about being too soft and spoilt by his Mum. When Robert shares his excitement about the development in his dancing and acting roles for the end of year production, Greg remains judgmentally quiet and his mother, adversely affected by the silence, compensates by unduly cuddling him and telling him he is awesome.

There is building tension within the household. Robert finds it hard to sleep and increasingly he just wants to be alone. At school he has taken to avoiding sport when he can and when he can't, he makes no effort to extend himself. No longer enthusiastic about the end of year production he asked to be excused from the parts he was playing and when pressed for a reason, simply said he hates that stuff now.

His mother, worried about his behavior and extremely disappointed by his decisions relating to the school production has tried to talk sense into him. Much to Robert's surprise Greg rose to his support by suggesting the mother get off his back and let the



kid drop that dance and drama stuff because it's not going to do him much good anyway.

Robert's circumstances have changed significantly and his current situation is distorting his understanding and belief in the concepts that have previously served him so well. He needs the opportunity to analyse one, some or all of the concepts again to see how they relate to his current situation and how they can help him to make sense of what he is going through and how they can continue to serve him well.

His teacher has seen the shift in Robert's behaviour and attitude and sees the need to guide him into a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the concepts. The teacher knows that by exploring the concepts yet again the class will make new discoveries and shift the meaning and influence of each concept into the current context of their lives.

My suggestion is that all students readdress the Life Raft concepts at the start of each year. This is an excellent way of building the relationship between students and teachers, and the students to each other. It is a sharing of the life experiences that endow meaning and relevance to the concepts. As the year progresses, the selection of which concept needs to be further explored will be determined by the behavior of the class in general or a group or the specific needs of an individual.

Robert will discover the way back to fulfilling his potential and find the means to withstand the pressures of his home life and the destructive judgment of Greg. He will find the joy of dance and the excitement of drama. He will use the challenges of sport to make him emotionally stronger and will learn to harness the deep satisfaction of being his own person while protecting and respecting the rights of others.

His teacher will, in the meantime, be collaborating with colleagues to create new, different and effective ways to maintain the ongoing involvement of students with the Life Raft concepts and all the self-awareness they generate.