

Transforming lunchtimes

Ransboro NS establish Friendship Squad

Our Friendship Squad was born amidst much concern as a staff about unhappy, inharmonious break times and, in particular, in an effort to keep a class with ongoing conflict issues occupied in a meaningful and enjoyable way during lunchtime. We were weary spending our 'yard duty lunchtimes' constantly mediating in arguments and sanctioning children for misbehaviour. The issue of behaviour on the yard was taking up a significant amount of our valuable time in school, as often issues spilled over into the afternoon and demanded thorough investigations which, in turn, were sapping our energy as a staff.

We decided to take our concerns seriously and to set aside time for discussion, sharing of ideas and brainstorming in relation to this issue at a staff meeting. The decisions that came out of that staff meeting are among some of the most positive in my time here as principal. We were all

fully committed to finding a proactive solution to the issues presenting themselves and after a lot of healthy debate and the flowing of many creative ideas, we decided that we would set up a system on the yard that would keep children engaged in an inclusive and exciting manner. The main obstacle we faced was the good old finances!

We set about fundraising and with the help of parents, and huge dedication of staff and we raised a significant sum of money, which we specifically targeted at this project. We decided that one particular class (a class at the time struggling with conflict and positive relationships) would be our chosen class to take responsibility for the co-ordination and running of our newly christened 'Friendship Squad'. At the time this fifth class were most excited by the prospect of this and it shone a very positive spotlight on them,

which in itself had a significant impact.

We carefully researched equipment that we felt would be durable, manageable and that would encourage inclusive play. We purchased a mix of the traditional and inexpensive equipment, for example, skipping ropes, French elastics, tennis racquets and soft balls along with exciting activities such as foam frisbies, giant Polydron, large Connect 4 and Jenga games, Hula Hoops, outdoor target games etc;



« The issue of behaviour on the yard was taking up a significant amount of our valuable time in school, as often issues spilled over into the afternoon »»



« The Friendship Squad teach new games to younger children, who can then initiate these games themselves »

Now that the Friendship Squad is well established, a set routine has evolved. The teacher of the 5th class every year kindly agrees to oversee the timetabling of the equipment and the development of a rota for the children. The children in this class are invited to apply for a position on the Friendship Squad, thus highlighting this very important role in the school. In the last three years every child in 5th class has applied! Eight children per day are on 'Friendship Squad Duty', two on each yard, and the activities on each yard are alternated on a weekly basis. The children on duty wear special Friendship Squad



bibs and caps. The 5th class teacher also teaches the 5th class children group games and the children are encouraged to play these also with the Friendship Squad.

The Friendship Squad teach new games to younger children, who can then initiate these games themselves. Some dedicated lessons are delivered to the fifth class on dealing with children in the yard and how to include a child that may appear lonely etc. Our caretaker made special upright wooden signs that say 'Friendship Stop' and all children know that they can come to this sign if they need company at lunchtime. The children also take responsibility for the care of the equipment and thus far, there has been minimal damage and/or wastage.

The Friendship Squad has transformed lunchtimes in our school. Teachers look forward to yard duty and there is minimal time spent now on resolving issues. Younger children are devastated if, for some unexpected reason, the Friendship Squad are late to the yard. They look forward each day to the games and activities and the playground is a hive of activity and fun. The older children do a wonderful job and all around our positive school climate is very evident by observing the yard at lunchtime. I would encourage any school, large or small, to give it a go! For more information please see our school website at www.ransboro.ie.

SIOBHÁN CLARKE is principal of Ransboro National School in Sligo.

