

Mother combats teasing among students

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Alyse November was upset when her son Jacob, a second-grade student at Banyan Creek Elementary School, came home in April and said a few of his schoolmates were teasing him.

November, a licensed social worker, said she could give Jacob the assertiveness he needs, but that would just be putting a band-aid on the problem.

Instead, she tackled the issue by developing an anti-teasing initiative called Different Like Me. The program teaches alternative methods of communication to children who tease.

The aim is to speed children's development of empathy by getting them to understand and emb-



LEARNING BY EXAMPLE: Alyse November, founder of the Different Like Me program, left, uses life-size dolls to discourage teasing among Banyan Creek Elementary School students. Students T. J. Golembiewski, left, Thais Correa, Roy Paiz and Erika Torres learn from the lesson. *Submitted photo*

race each other's differences, November said. If they understand that other children also have feel-

ings, they will probably decide they want to have a positive impact on others, she said.

Bill Fay, principal of Banyan Creek Elementary, and Safe Schools of Palm Beach County

allowed November to run an 11-week pilot program. Some students in first through fourth grades attend the Different Like Me program once a week.

November said she hopes to offer the program to the whole school next year and that it eventually becomes part of the curriculum in all schools.

She runs the program with several assistants and requires teachers to be present so they are able to reinforce on a daily basis what the children learn.

Teachers at Banyan Creek Elementary say the classroom climate has improved since the program began about two months ago. They say they have noticed that their students are working

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together, helping each other, and including each other on the playground.

"As a principal, you know you have a wonderful program when the teachers come to you unsolicited and tell you they like the program," Fay said.

November also has received positive responses from parents.

"Some are putting techniques in action in their own home," she said. When asked if the students like the program, she said, "Like is an understatement. They love it."

Students now admit that they tease and pick on each other, she said. This kind of honesty is what November wants to see, because it enables her to address the issues with the class and allows the

children to work on their own issues.

November uses life-sized dolls to encourage active participation during role play, which encourages making friends, including others, and considering how other students would want to be treated.

"I have their total attention," she said of the students.

November said she doesn't think teasing is ever OK. Her definition of teasing is saying something with the intent to hurt someone, and even if someone is just teasing to have fun, it can hurt, she said.

Poor academic performance, negative role development, poor self-esteem, negative peer relationships and the feeling of never fitting in are consequences of teasing, November said.

"My hope is if we can provide some preventative

programs in elementary school, hopefully it won't get huge and do damage to a child," she said, adding that teasing is most prevalent in middle school.

Kindergarten students tease each other, but the issues get bigger as children grow, she said.

In the past, teasing was addressed only if teachers overheard something or children came to them to report an issue, but Different Like Me takes it to another level, said Fay, who has been principal for 11 years.

"[November] creates scenarios and brings up situations all children, and many adults, would remember," he said.

"Is it going to eradicate it? No," Fay said of teasing. "But if it makes a difference in a few kids, it's worth the effort."

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