

# "I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW I LIKED YOU "

*Elementary Students Learn People  
Skills and Subject Matter*

By Shellie Dale

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**T**hree years ago my daughter started first grade. Her teacher, who was trained in cooperative learning, put her in a group with classmates from first through third grade. I was skeptical about the idea, and feared that it would be detrimental to her learning experience.

I worried about the older children doing my daughter's work for her. I worried that her opinions would not be valued, and wondered whether she would be listened to at all. I pictured her just sitting in the group while other children did her thinking for her. As the year progressed, I kept in contact with the teacher and carefully watched my daughter's progress. Within a short time I became impressed with how much a cooperative group could produce. For each lesson, individual children were given specific tasks and directions. In addition to learning academic material, the students also developed social skills as they worked together to solve a problem or complete an assignment.

Gradually I began to like having my child involved in cooperative learning and to implement it in my own classroom. I went from being a skeptic to falling in love with it! Now it is becoming a part of me. As I prepare for my classes I find myself planning all sorts of cooperative learning techniques.

### **Developing People Skills**

Throughout our lives we deal with people. Whether at the grocery store or at the bank, on the job or at church, we interact with others. And how different we all are! We come in different shapes and sizes. We come from different backgrounds and countries. We are of different religions, and even those of us who attend the same church see things differently. And we seem to come with an infinite number of attitudes and feelings. Having dynamic people skills is a necessity for us to be successful in our relationships at home and at work. Through cooperative learning, teachers can empower students to relate positively to their peers. Cooperative learning creates an environment where students feel safe to share honestly with one another.

Children come to school knowing

much about their individual worlds. However, moving into the bigger world can be an abrupt step for the egocentric primary child. Teachers must lay a foundation that takes students from a limited self-focus to an expanded awareness of the importance of other people. Teaching a child to share his or her ideas and to give and take in a group setting is no small thing. Learning to complete a job together, and to work out disagreements as they arise will help students prepare for the world beyond the classroom.

### **Developing Trust**

An important first step in a successful cooperative learning program is developing trust between students and between students and teacher. This creates a safe

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environment for children to learn. It can be done in many creative ways. I like to use the "assembly line," in which each child is given a specific task necessary to complete a project. Since competition is not a factor, groups can borrow ideas. For instance, a group of primary-grade children were busy making cheese balls coated with crackers. One child used the plastic bag her crackers came in to smash her crackers and avoid making a big mess from smashing them on a bread board with a cup. Other groups observed her idea and chose to do the same.

Social skills can really flourish in a cooperative setting. We often underestimate children's ability to work with others, and to reflect on their experience. I once watched a first-grade teacher leading a class discussion after a cooperative Bible assignment. She asked the students how well it had gone. One said honestly and

matter-of-factly, "We didn't do good. We argued a lot." But after a pause, he added, "But I think we'll know what to do next time."

As adults, we are so ready to jump in to solve our students' problems. But our solutions rarely become theirs. Social skills require practice. Sometimes it's messy. But it is worth it for many reasons, including acquiring basic language skills. As their groups work, children use language in a natural context. They learn to listen to others and to accept differences in the way others do things.

Experimenting with cooperative strategies in several different subject areas has led to some fascinating and challenging activities for me and my students. To enrich a second-grade Bible lesson, partners were given a poster on which to create a picture of God's throne. After reading a description from the Bible lesson, we brainstormed and then went to work with crayons. The result was one of my favorite classroom displays—the children's re-creation of the heavenly throne room.

### **Becoming Part of a Group**

I like to take time to do classbuilding through the sharing circle. As children relate individual experiences they become a part of the group. The sharing circle can work well almost any time, such as having the children tell what they did for the holidays. We often share spontaneously as we're reading. The book, *Ira Sleeps Over*, inspired the class to tell what stuffed toy each slept with.

Sometimes students choose not to participate and that option is respected. Currently we are getting familiar with our Bibles. Sitting in a sharing circle allows the students to help one another search for Bible texts, and to recite the books of the Bible round-robin.

Group building activities are tremendously important. At the beginning of each new unit, we form new groups and the students make identifying banners, flags, or posters. One of my favorite experiences this year was reading a note written by a formerly friendless little boy to another classmate, "I now have nine friends." I believe this change came about because he felt included and his opinions valued in his cooperative groups.

## Where to Use Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning can be used in every subject area. During a series of pre-writing lessons, I read to my students a book entitled, *This Is What Would Happen If Everybody Did*, as well as a book I wrote entitled, *This Is What Would Happen If Nobody Did*. In our community circle we discussed the implications of books for our classroom, and after identifying needs, finally brainstormed ideas for our own “class cooperation book.” Each child chose a page to illustrate, resulting in a book that was read over and over again. We also did group books. Such group projects and buddy book reports can continue throughout the year.

Reading practice can occur effectively in groups of

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two or more. Students read to each other, getting help with difficult words from their peers. I sometimes feel concerned about the noise level in the classroom during these shared reading periods, but when I look up from an individual consultation or group discussion, I find everyone on task and deeply involved in his or her reading experiences. In other words, the classroom “hum” is an indication of productivity.

Book projects are more fun when two or more can work together. Puppet shows, dioramas, dramatic presentation, and art come to life as several students combine their talents. One group of girls in my class recently presented a puppet show with handmade puppets and dialogue they had written themselves. It was easy to tell how good they felt about their project. They had invested a lot of themselves in the cutting, gluing, and writing, but they had also invested in each other.

Other students are working on props for a dramatic presentation of the story of the Trojan horse. My kindergarten class enjoyed a book response activity that came after we read the book, *Hello, Mr. Scarecrow*, by Rob Lewis. In each group one child became the scarecrow. The other three had to dress the scarecrow in proper attire.

Spelling practice with friends can generate positive feelings about what is often seen as a discouraging task. During the pre-test, students confer before writing down their words. The post-test can still be taken individually, but I have found that “heads together” at the start of the week really gets everyone off right. Games in the spelling center have become popular, such as “Hangman” and “Word Scramble,” as students practice their spelling words together. In fact, students are beginning to recognize just how valuable a fellow student can be in reviewing spelling words, so they often seek out peers to join them.

Children love to be a part of a group instead of being singled out. In memory

*The author's students make cookies in a cooperative activity that culminates a theme on getting an appetite for reading.*

verse review we start with one word and go around the circle, with each child adding the next word until the verse is completed. The round-robin format can also be used in math—reciting numbers by 2’s, 5’s and 10’s; in science—naming the four food groups, or the planets in our solar system; in language—rhyming. The possibilities are endless.

As my conviction for cooperative learning grows, I see potential group activities wherever I turn. In a science unit on simple machines I gave each team a square of cardboard and a box with parts from an old clock, telephone, and radio. (Taking these things apart was a lesson in itself.) Each student shared the responsibility of creating a parts collage, which we spray painted gold and displayed on a classroom bulletin board.

Many physical education activities lend themselves to cooperative work. Simple tumbling stunts require students to not only work together, but also to trust one another. Many familiar games can be community building, as well as physically challenging.

### **Creating and Learning Community**

Cooperative education creates a learning community where students feel they belong and their thoughts and opinions are important. This feeling of belonging includes more than being comfortable in their classroom and liking their teacher. It includes a closeness to fellow students. Recently I overheard a conversation between two second-grade boys as they played together at recess. They were discussing their growing friendship (they hadn’t been friends in the past). One boy said to the other, “I didn’t even know I liked you until I sat by you.” I believe he meant, “Because we are working together toward a common goal, I have learned to appreciate how special you are, and that I can learn to get along with you even though we differ in many ways.” Every person can have a similar experience as he or she learns to work cooperatively with

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others. When students as a team create something that they can be proud of, which no one could have done as well alone, it draws them closer together.

Teachers are blessed with a special opportunity to train children to work together. Such skills will bring about better friendships among students, and enhance every aspect of their lives. ☞

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