

FIVE R'S TO HELP THE HURTING

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BY
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You undoubtedly know that your role as a teacher has expanded. Parents expect you to help their children—and not just scholastically. The seismic tremors that threaten the stability of churches, homes, and society at large have also shaken up the role of Christian schools. As a result, many Christian teachers feel a special concern for the emotional as well as academic lives of children in their classrooms. You may be wondering, “What is my role when each year I see more kids suffering hurts that interfere with their learning?” As a general rule, practicing the five R’s listed below will help you avoid the twin pitfalls of ignoring children or trying to take the place of their parents.

Recognize

Except for Brad, the group of five students seemed busily engaged in the project. Four of them were talking and giggling, but Brad was looking down, his body turned to the side, shoulders slumped.

The teacher, Carol Slater, wondered: “What’s bothering him? I noticed him standing alone by his locker this morning before school.”

Stop, look, and listen. This advice about crossing the street can also apply to working with students. Stop to pay attention. Find a way to learn about your students’ places in their families, their likes and dis-

likes, their friends and enemies, their habits, and what makes them laugh and cry.

And *literally* look at kids. See who cozies up to whom, who is the wallflower, who craves attention, who never meets another’s eyes. Look for patterns of behavior: One child never smiles; another always laughs loudest and longest; a third hits people, or stays at your desk, or flares up often, or puts his hands on the girls, or teases other students mercilessly.

Listening is the hardest part. Listening means recognizing tones, postures, and rhythms—on the playground, in the locker room, and out in the halls. Good teachers pay attention.

Carol Slater recognized that Brad wasn’t fitting in, inside or outside her classroom.

Remember

Carol Slater empathized with Brad. She had been the center of attention as a middle school student, but her sister Marcy was like Brad. Marcy had come home from school moping and complaining. Carol remembered telling her, “You don’t have friends because you’re always crabby; you never want to do anything.” But it was her sister’s teacher who had coaxed her out of her shell.

To really care for hurting students, you have to remember what it’s like to be their age. We have been given excellent, God-directed intuition and a bucketful of experi-

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ence to know what's within the normal range.

Also, remember what you learned on your way to becoming a teacher: all the reading and discussion about the developmental stages of children, as well as your experiences as a parent or a teacher.

Remember, too, that most hurting kids have masks that hide their hurts and shut you out. And beware of your own carelessness; for example, I once had a student who wrote on a course evaluation, "You said 'Good morning' to all the other kids in this room, but you never said it to me."

Carol remembered her sister and her own mistakes when she looked at Brad.

Record

Carol Slater kept a pocket-sized notebook in her book bag. The first time she noticed Brad's detachment in the small group and remembered him standing alone by his locker, she didn't write anything down. But the second time she did:

"I saw Brad on my way to the faculty room today. He was sitting by his locker drawing. I said, 'Hi, Brad, what are you drawing?' He smiled, got flustered, and shoved the paper in his locker.

"I saw Brad's notebook when I was helping another student today; he had drawn four or five pictures, all of knives sticking into humans with blood dripping."

Recording observations about stu-

dents takes time, concentration, and effort. In guiding students it is a temptation to (1) assign blame for problems, (2) shoot from the hip based on one incident, (3) ignore kids, (4) mother or father them to death, dispensing thoughtless pity, and (5) make generalizations about them based on rumors or assumptions about their lives. Recording your observations will help you avoid these temptations.

If you notice well, you can spot patterns underneath the surface. Most kids come to school with combed hair; if one child has matted and dirty hair, record it once in your mind and the next time in writing.

If you notice during playground duty that Sam playfully pounds his buddies on the shoulder with his fist, record it mentally; if he does it again or you hear a colleague mention it, write it down. If Sam also reveals that he loves to play violent video games, record that, too.

Write down the details that your practiced eye observes, just as Carol Slater took the time to note Brad's drawings.

Respond

Once after class, Carol Slater said to Brad, "I noticed that you really like to draw. Could I see your drawings sometime?" Brad just looked down at first, then seemed to glare at her in anger, grabbing his things and bolting from the room without saying a word.

Another time, Brad wrote a story in which he underlined the word hate about five times when a character had said "I hate you" to his father. Carol wrote in the margin, "He must really mean it." When she handed back the story, she noticed that after reading her comment, he crumpled up the paper and shoved it into his notebook.

A teacher can't fix every student's failures or frustrations. It's impossible to reach a child if he or she doesn't trust you or is buried beneath a heap of hurt. But you must respond—in fact, you *do* respond—whether you are conscious of it or not. My response to the student who wished for my "Good morning" had been not to give it, although at the time I wasn't aware of my failure.

Your best response is a Christian one. When a child seems to want to talk with you, invite him or her in. When you see

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kids ridiculing a classmate, take time in class to show the right way, to condemn nastiness and condone caring. When you notice that Sherry is skinnier by the month and her friends are disgusted by her remarks about being too fat, ask the school counselor to talk with her.

Carol Slater reached out to Brad with a steady stream of "Good mornings." She also continued to compliment him on his gift for drawing.

Refer

Carol Slater mentioned to her colleague, Angelo Rodriguez, in the faculty room one day that Brad was really shy. Angelo said, "I had Brad last year; he's got some problems at home, I think. He used to draw some pretty ugly stuff, especially a character he said looks like his dad."

After further conversation, in which they agreed that Brad's behavior was cause for concern, Carol headed for Diane Kistler, the school counselor. She told Diane what she had written in her notebook and what Angelo had said. Carol asked, "Should I call Brad's parents? Should I confront Brad with what I suspect? Should I try to find a friend for him?"

Diane told Carol that she would talk with Brad and report back with answers to those questions.

Teachers should confer with colleagues and the principal about any student whose behavior is odd or habitually unsatisfactory. Sometimes you ought to see the principal or counselor over just one dramatic detail: a cigarette burn on a child's arm, a boy who reports that his dad left home last night, a student who reports that Toby has a knife in his locker.

Unless you suspect that parents are abusing their children (in which case, social agencies must be contacted), refer

what you notice about a student to his or her parents, sooner rather than later. If you notice that Tim is persistently caustic in his comments, call his parents. If you suspect that Amber has been experimenting with drugs, call her mother.

In every call to parents, describe in clear and descriptive language what you have observed about the child's behavior and demeanor. Preface your descriptions of their child by saying (and meaning) something like this: "I'm calling because I want to help you in the education of your child. We've got to work together. Recently, I have observed. . . I'm not sure exactly what it all means, but how do you think we both can help her?" It's wise to follow the parent's response with ideas about how each of you can help. Your attitude and manner are crucial.

Certainly, your role involves more than dispensing information or pointing the way to the school's media center, but it doesn't mean counseling kids at the expense of your primary task in teaching, either. You will walk best between the two extremes if you follow the five R's: recognize, remember, record, respond, and refer.

Epilogue

Diane Kistler did report back to Carol Slater within a week, and at least a half-dozen times after. During that school year and the next, Diane set up meetings involving Brad, his parents, their pastor, and a professional counselor. Brad's problems in his family were deep; his emotional scar tissue remains. But because Carol noticed him, persisted in caring, conferred with a colleague, and referred him to Diane, he's more sociable, calmer, and better able to "join in" now than when she first paid attention to him. If Carol had looked the other way, who knows what might have happened to Brad. She persisted for Brad's good. ☺

Daniel R. Vander Ark, a former teacher and principal, is now Executive Director of Christian Schools International, Grand Rapids, Michigan. This article presents, in condensed form, some insights contained in his book entitled Helping the Hurting, which is available for \$7.50 from Christian Schools International, 3350 East Paris Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512.