

The NUTURING CLASS

Prepared by: Eva de Gosztonyi, Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management
450-672-4010 ext 6066\ edegosztonyi@rsb.qc.ca

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BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS MODEL

For two years, a “typical” behaviour class was in place at Riverside School Board that was for Cycle 1 Elementary students. It was run on behavioural and cognitive behavioural principles – rewards, consequences, and lots of social skills training. It was meant to be a short-term placement and students were returned to their classrooms after 4 months in the programme. The results were not satisfying. Students very quickly reverted to former behaviours.

During this time, while looking for a more effective intervention approach, I was introduced to the Nurture Groups (1, 2, 3) and to the Neufeld (4) Attachment-based developmental approach. Both, one in practice and the other in theory, advocated looking at children in the context of their attachment needs and through a developmental lens. At this time as well, the newest brain research was confirming that children, teens and even young adults were far from full brain development. Upon understanding that the part of the brain responsible for Executive Functions was only developing in young children, it no longer made sense to either consequence children for their natural immaturity, nor expect them to learn skills and apply them as one could expect of an adult. Finally, research on the effect of trauma and deprivation on the brain, helped the understanding that not only were these children naturally immature, but because of what they were and, possibly, are living, they are even more immature than their peers. All this made a convincing argument that a radically different approach was necessary.

THE MODEL

The Nurturing Class is a concept that was developed to specifically help students in distress. It was inspired by the Nurture Groups of Great Britain (Boxall and Bennathan) and its functioning is guided by the attachment-based developmental approach of Dr. Gordon Neufeld. Both emphasize children’s need for strong attachments with caring adults and view misbehaviour as serving a developmental purpose or as being a function of immaturity.

The Nurturing Class emphasizes attachment and structure as ways of providing students with an environment in which natural maturation and learning can take place. Adults in the class work to develop, deepen and protect their relationship with the children in their care. They provide the structure necessary to compensate for a student’s immaturity.

In the interactions with a child, attachment is respected in all of its complexity, allowing the adults to both care for and take charge of the child’s well being. In a developmental approach, it is understood that change takes time. While students are helped to cope with immediate situations, a long-term view is held and an optimism, that with time the child will develop the capacity to handle more challenging situations as maturation occurs.

Ideally, children are encouraged and permitted to feel their vulnerability in the safety of a caring adult relationship.

And so, when children misbehave, the adults, rather than focusing on changing the behaviour, attempt to understand what the child is trying to communicate about what is not working in his life. Often the demands of the classroom are out of sync with the child's developmental level and the child "misbehaves" because she cannot carry out the task as requested. The adult will then try to rearrange the child's environment so as to compensate for the child's lack of capacity, such as putting a routine or structure into place that would make it easier for the child to carry out the behaviour successfully.

At times, the child's "misbehaviour" is an indicator of emotional distress. The adults will try to understand the child's needs from this perspective and respond in a comforting way.

Riverside School Board has had a Nurturing Class called NEST (Nurturing and Education Students in Transition) since the fall of 2005. The model for the Nurturing Class concept was fine tuned in the three full years of operation and continues to be reflected and improved upon. A second class at Riverside School Board; an in-school programme at Springdale School of the Lester B Pearson School Board, and two classes at the Western Quebec School Board were started this year using this as a model to serve the needs of students with significant behavioural, emotional and learning needs.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of the Nurturing Class program is to create a safe environment where extremely fragile and at-risk students can reach a comfort level that will permit them to build attachments with adults so that they then can be ready to take risks in their academic learning.

THE STUDENTS:

The students are of a similar age, e.g. Cycle 1, Cycle 2 or Cycle 3, with a possible 3 year age span, who are experiencing emotional, behavioural and, most likely, learning difficulties. Some express their frustration by acting out and others through internalization. Many have had difficulty coping with the demands of a regular classroom, spending a good part their day, week or school year outside of the classroom and/or out of school because of the extreme nature of their acting out behaviours. All have been indentified as being emotionally fragile, the "quieter" ones often being diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or possibly, Reactive Attachment Disorder, or both.

The families of these students agree to their child participating in this programme and also agree to co-operate with interventions suggested by the Social Worker (Family Support Worker), Psychologist and the Nurturing Class team.

STAFF AND PHYSICAL SETUP:

There is one teacher and 1 aide (technician) for the group, as well as other support staff to

cover recess and the lunch hour. In an ideal situation there would be a third person in the class, allowing for the possibility of taking a child to a quiet location to deal with their emotions, and not leaving the rest of the students unattended.

The classroom is divided into 3 sections: a kitchen with a table, a relaxation area with a couch and cushions, and the formal teaching area. In the kitchen area the group eats together (Sunshine Snack) and cooks together once a week. Students are taught basic table manners and are provided with an opportunity to practice conversational skills. In the relaxation area there is a couch, cushions, blanket, carpet and soothing toys. The students are encouraged to use the calm down area when they are feeling upset, having difficulty or tired. The staff use the opportunity to help students talk about their emotions.

ACADEMIC FOCUS:

The day is very structured as the students need predictability and routine in order to function.. A sample schedule for Cycle 1 students would look like this:

- Morning Message
- Calendar and carpet time
- Problem of the day
- Sunshine Snack
- Individual academic work
- Structured Playtime
- Physical Education
- Academic Work

Teachers of older students will prepare a predictable schedule that is appropriate to their developmental level. Playtime, however, will be, at least initially a scheduled time for the students at all age levels.

In September and October not much academic work is demanded of the students. These weeks are used to establish routines, practice habits that help classroom functioning, and deepen relationships with the adults to lay the groundwork for academic learning.

Literacy and numeracy are taught initially through the Morning Message and Calendar/Carpet time and activities such as baking and crafts. The SoundPrints approach is used to develop specific literacy skills. Science is used as the content area to stimulate interest in the written word. As the year progresses, the teacher will introduce the Daily Five structure to eventually permit students to develop the stamina to work independently or in pairs. Numeracy skills are introduced and practiced through activities such as baking and using multisensory approaches such as Touch Math and other alternate Math programmes that require less reading.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES:

- Weekly baking; setting/cleaning the table for a meal; walks around the neighbourhood; planting flower gardens; special celebrations; helping in the school and in classrooms with younger students.

RECESS AND LUNCHTIME:

The students have a different recess period than the rest of the school or play in a restricted area under close supervision as most of them have particular difficulty managing their behaviour in situations where there is a lack of structure and high emotion.

The children eat lunch in their classroom with two lunch monitors. They have the same lunch monitors every day. They eat for 30 minutes then they go outside to play in a designated area. During inclement weather, they have organized activities in the gym or classroom.

OTHER KEY FEATURES:

- In June: (for new students) visits to the class and school by the parents and child to meet the staff.
- In-take meeting with the parents and Nurture Class Team to discuss the child's needs in June and again in August, if necessary.
- Beginning of the School Year: **Progressive Entry** over two weeks to allow students to develop attachment to the adults in the programme and to minimize the stress of learning new class routines.
- Staff-Parent communication via e-mail, phone calls or through the Social Worker (Family Support Worker). Behaviour concerns are not communicated in the daily agenda, as this has not been found to be of help in past years. Students become fearful of showing their parent(s) the agenda because of problems experienced in the day. When parents try to take action to ensure the student has a "good" day the next day, this can increase the emotional pressure on the child.
- Rewards and consequences are rarely used, as these strategies are not seen to be helpful in "modifying" children's behaviour over the long term.
- Students are given a variety of strategies to help them to calm themselves, alone or with a staff member, and are permitted to use these when needed.
- Students are permitted to use "weighted animals" to help with focus and as a calming tool.
- Students are helped with their behaviour through lots of visual cueing e.g. Daily Schedule using Pictograms, use of Time Timer clock, etc.
- Time out is NEVER used as a consequence, although students are permitted and encouraged to withdraw in order to calm themselves.
- Sometimes a student is asked to leave the room because their behaviour is a disruption to the others, but the student is accompanied by an adult and readily accepted back.
- If child has a major crisis, for the sake of the other students, he is, at times, asked to stay

at home for a few days. She is always welcomed back with delight. This time away is also often used to help the parents to sort out possible contributing factors to the child's behavioural difficulties.

SUPPORT FOR THE STAFF:

The teacher and aide(s) require a lot of support because of the nature of the emotional needs of their students. Regular weekly supervision by a Board psychologist, Behaviour Specialist and/or Special Education Consultant is recommended. Also available to the staff and students are the services of a Special Education Consultant, Speech and Language Pathologist and other specialists as needed.

In the NEST programme, as the result of a special entente with the CLSC Samuel de Champlain, the programme receives the support of a Social Worker for about 10 hours per week. The main role for this person is support to the parents of the students in NEST. The Social Worker acts as a liaison with Youth Protection and other interveners involved with the child and the family to ensure that resources are accessed, co-ordinated and used to full potential. A Family Liaison Worker or School Social Worker is an essential part of the Nurturing Class model. Support to parents is necessary to help the students with their challenges.

PROGRAMME EVALUATION:

NEST has been in operation since the Fall of 2005. A total of 17 students have attended as some students remained in the programme for two years. Of those, 5 have returned to a regular classroom, 6 have been placed in a low-ratio class for students with learning difficulties, 2 were sent to a special school for students with severe cognitive delays, 1 went to a hospital programme and 3 are continuing in NEST for a second year. All students improved their academic performance and increased their school attendance significantly. The parents have been very grateful for their child's participation in the programme and note improvements in behaviour at home as well.

REQUIREMENTS THAT FAVOUR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

In order to best meet the needs of students who are experiencing problems behaving and learning, certain conditions have been found to be necessary to ensure successful implementation of these programmes. While not every suggestion listed below is absolutely necessary, most have been found to be very helpful in setting up an environment and preparing staff to receive these students so that they can remain in school and enter into the learning process.

PERSONNEL

Students referred to the Nurturing Class are classically immature, frustrated, prone to aggression,

likely to explode, reluctant to engage in learning activities (especially writing), have difficulty co-operating, are poor at following directions, resist changes in routine and are hypersensitive and quick to change moods. The staff who deal with these children must be well versed in their needs and receive adequate support in order to continue to be able to meet their emotional and learning needs.

I. Staffing:

1. Teacher
2. Aide(s)
3. 2 Lunch Monitors
4. Administrator with designated time for the Class
5. Psychologist/Behaviour Specialist
6. Family Liaison worker or Social Worker trained in parent support and parent education.
7. Daycare staff, to provide before and after school care as well as emergency daytime care.
8. Bus driver and possibly a bus attendant

II. Staff Training:

1. Teacher trained in
 - a. Attachment-based developmental approach
 - b. Daily Five
 - c. SoundPrints
 - d. Alternate Math programme
 - e. Non Violent Crisis Intervention or Behaviour Management Systems Training
2. Aide trained in:
 - a. Attachment-based developmental approach
 - b. Non Violent Crisis Intervention or Behaviour Management Systems Training
 - c. Daily Five
3. Psychologist*, Consultant*, Family Liaison Worker* and Administrators trained in:
 - a. Attachment-based developmental approach (*up to Level II Intensive at least)
 - b. Non Violent Crisis Intervention or Behaviour Management Systems Training
 - c. Daily Five (at least familiar with)
4. Other staff trained in:
 - a. Attachment-based developmental approach (basic introduction)
 - b. Non Violent Crisis Intervention or Behaviour Management Systems Training

III. Staff Support (1/2 day per week):

1. Weekly support meetings with Psychologist and Consultant– (Specifically structured to maximize meeting time)
 - a. Attachment/Greeting ritual

- b. Sharing frustrations
- c. Review of each child – Slice of life
- d. Issues
- e. Goals
- f. Plans

IV. Professional Development (½ day per month)

1. Teachability Factor DVD – could be done in 6 parts – 1 hour review of content seen 1 hour discussion and application to the class.
2. Other topics as needed such as Understanding Aggression, CounterWill, Bullying

V. Classroom visits by Psychologist, Consultant and Family Liaison Worker

Although care must be taken to not overwhelm the students with too many visitors, the key support professionals must be aware of class dynamics. A reasonable visiting schedule should be set up.

PHYSICAL SET UP

Students with emotional difficulties (i.e. with behaviour and learning problems) are hypersensitive and immature, hence their classroom setting needs to be organized, structured, and warm and welcoming in order to help them to cope with their challenges. They also need to be able to find acceptable ways to “tune out” when their world becomes overwhelming so that they do not explode or behave in a manner that interferes with the learning of other students. These students also require extra attachment activities, of which providing food is a key one, hence the need for a kitchen area.

I. Work areas:

0. 1. Table and chairs for eating and working
2. Individual desks
3. Daily 5 teaching desk (kidney shaped)
4. Baskets for supplies, work, individual
5. Shelves and counters for holding the baskets

I. II. Calm down area:

0. 1. Couch
2. Rocking chair or beanbag chair
3. Carpet
4. Basket of stress toys
5. Weighted animals
6. Blankets and pillows

II. III. Kitchen area

0. 1. Sink
2. Fridge

3. Microwave
4. Dishes and utensils
5. Cupboard for dry food and equipment
6. Table for eating

III. IV. Toy Centre:

0. 1. Lego
2. Doll Centre
3. Plastic animals/Farm etc.
4. Blocks
5. Toy cars

IV. V. Other:

0. 1. Time Timer clocks
2. CD player(s)
3. Weighted Animals
4. Stress toys
5. Books – leveled, general interest, science oriented, information text
- 6. Telephone** – ideally a cell phone
7. Budget for purchasing daily food
8. Computer – mainly for teacher use

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

I. Calming Room

1. Some students will require a more private space in which to express their emotional needs. Initially it will likely be used during a “crisis” or “explosion”. The hope is that the students will see it as a safe place so that they can calm down and finally to express their sadness about all that is not working in their lives. Students will always be accompanied by an adult.

II. Access to school resources

1. Resource Teacher:
 - a. Nearly all of the students referred because of behavioural difficulties will also have learning difficulties. Although at first they may not be willing to work with the Resource Teacher, these students should be considered to be on the teachers “list”. The RT and teacher should work out a plan for having the students develop a relationship with the RT before they are expected to work with him/her, e.g. class visits, story reading, helping with preferred activities, asking the student to help with a project, etc.
 - b. Will work with the staff to provide appropriate materials and intervention strategies in literacy and numeracy.
 - c. Will assess student levels of academic functioning at the beginning and end of the school year.

2. Gymnasium

- a. These students should have their own Physical Education class with the Physical Education teacher in the school gym (especially for older students).
- b. Ideally, especially for the younger student, this person should have some idea of exercises that promote sensory integration and relaxation.

III. Data Gathering and Recordkeeping:

1. Assessment of academic functioning at beginning and end of each school year
2. IEP
3. Tracking of behavioural issues
4. Monthly progress e.g. “slice of life”
5. Year End report by teacher, aide, professional
6. Communicating with parents
7. Parent year end comments

IV. Academic Programme needs:

1. Daily Five – as a structure to promote literacy and to teach habits for future integration
2. SoundPrints – an approach that addresses the learning needs of students with a variety of learning disabilities.
3. Alternate Math programme – for those students for whom reading and language processing are a challenge.
4. French – because many of these students find learning in a second language particularly frustrating, and because they do not respond well to adults whom they do not know well, it is recommended that French be taught by the classroom teacher.

RESOURCE LIST:

1. **Effective Intervention In Primary Schools - Nurture Groups** Marion Bennathan | David Fulton Publishers, Ltd. | 1996
2. **Nurture Groups in School: Principles & Practice** Marion Bennathan & Marjorie Boxall | Marjorie Corwin Press Inc | Nelson Education Ltd. |2002
3. **Nurture Groups In School And At Home** Paul Cooper | Jessica Kingsley Publishers| 2007
4. **Hold on to Your Kids** Gordon Neufeld & Gabor Maté | Random House / Knopf | 2004
5. **The Daily Five** Gail Boushey and Joan Moser| Stenhouse Publishers | 2006
6. **Unconditional Teaching** Alfie Kohn |Educational Leadership| 2005
<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/uncondtchg.htm>
7. **The Boy who was Raised as a Dog** Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz |Basic Books| 2006
8. **Educating Oppositional and Defiant Children** Philip S. Hall and Nancy D. Hall |Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development| 2003
9. **The Explosive Child** Ross W. Greene, Ph.D. |Harper Collins Publishers| 2001 (2nd Ed)
10. **The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher** Harry K. Wong |Harry K. Wong Publications| 2004
11. **Secrets of Discipline for Parents and Teachers and With All Due Respect – Keys for**

building effective school discipline Ronald G. Morrish These books are available from www.realdiscipline.com

12. Real Boys William S. Pollack |Owl Books| 1999

“All the behaviour we see in Nurture Groups: clinging, attention-seeking, panic, anger, restlessness, low self esteem etc. can be understood in the context of how a child’s attachments are developed and the interventions we offer use that knowledge.” **Marion Bennathan**

“Accepting students for who they are, rather than for what they do, is integrally related to the idea of teaching the whole child.” **Alfie Kohn**

“When dealing with the immature, we need to win their hearts to open their minds to our influence.” **Gordon Neufeld**

For more information about the Nurturing Class model, please do not hesitate to contact:

Eva de Gosztonyi Co-ordinator Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management
Riverside School Board, 299 Sir Wilfrid Laurier St. Lambert, QC J4R 2V7
450-672-4010 ext. 6066 edegosztonyi@rsb.qc.ca