

Better Together:

Caring and Including, Instead of Bullying (PreK-6th)

by

Sarah Pirtle

To order: website: www.sarahpirtle.com Email: sarahpirtle@gmail.com

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All songs by Sarah Pirtle unless otherwise indicated.

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The book BETTER TOGETHER (215 pages) includes this material.

Essay: Supporting Positive Environments for Young People

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Information about methods for parents and teachers:

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SUPPORTING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By Sarah Pirtle

Better Together is about relationship building, and this includes repair. When people are harmed, bullied, excluded, mistreated, and violated, they commonly experience isolation and a dislocation of social identity. Our work is to create cultures of caring in social settings so that mistreatment goes against the norm. We hold people accountable when mistreatment occurs. We take responsibility for the repair—the healing of the individuals and the mending of the circle.

As a classroom teacher in the 1970's, I began to observe ways in which children's interactions became disconnected. I invented activities to help them reconnect by supplying missing information about relationships. When children reached out to Philip and he ran to the other side of the room, what song or game would give him the experience that interactions could be trustworthy? When Lily and Gina grabbed each other's hands and ignored the children who wanted to join them, what activities would guide them to expand without losing each other? I looked for potential change, like taking a fragmented dot-to-dot picture, and drawing in the lines.

What I brought to the programs in 2011 at Leeds Elementary School, Leeds, MA began right there when I first had the powerful experience of finding that activities using music helped children develop cooperation and communication skills. This method became elaborated and developed over the next decades. Since songs have an important role in setting new norms and creating a positive culture, this book shares this approach and endeavors to make it accessible.

Researchers Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig of the University of York in Canada write about the role of adults in intervention and underscore that, “adults are responsible for constructing environments that promote positive peer interactions.” (2006) The language that I use to articulate this is that we help children feel the embrace of their community; we create a strong circle that holds them. I want children to experience social safety directly.

This book identifies everyday methods that can be used in teachable moments. It also articulates social messages that children need, and backs up those messages with songs.

I pass on effective practices that I've developed: using signals like “ouch” and “oops;” fostering “discovery time;” and collaborating with a “group brain.” I also show methods that have come from the thinking of many people, methods which I've elaborated on through

experience. These include how to use “talk-it-out” methods, how to lead a group so that members feel held, and how to introduce the “Stop Rule,” a phrase learned from children.

Over thirty years ago, people from all over the country began to gather with a similar purpose. Educators met through conferences with organizations including the National Association for Mediation in Education, Educators for Social Responsibility, and the Creative Response to Conflict Program. We described how we worked with young people on conflict resolution and peer mediation, as well as on comprehending the roots of peace and the problem of violence. At these conferences and gatherings, we said to each other –*What have you learned in your work? Let’s put our insights together.*

You are invited to continue this investigation and contribute to this legacy. Around the world right now countless people are working on changing bullying and other forms of violence. When we work on preventing harm-doing, this sets us on a journey of growth that validates each person’s contributions – all ages: children, teens, and adults -- and encourages people to create their own discoveries about how to make things better.

Resource cited: Pepler, D.J. & Craig, W. (2006). *Bullying, Interventions, and The Role of Adults. In Education.com: Bringing Learning to Life.* Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/reference/article/role-of-adults-in-preventing-bullying>.

How Songs Teach

By Sarah Pirtle

When we sing songs, we remind ourselves that our voices matter. Sharon Tracy, director of Quabbin Mediation comments, “People learn from music in a much more deep and visceral way.” Isobel Arthen, who sings on the last song, *Turning of the World*, Song 40, by Ruth Pelham says, “When I sing that song I feel like right at that moment we *are* changing the world.”

Songs create movement and conversation. When I first began working at Leeds Elementary School, a group of fifth grade girls met with me during the after-school program time, and I wrote down the messages that they wanted adults to understand. They said:

We kids also want bullying to change.

So much of this school wants to take it seriously.

We think bullying shouldn’t just be ignored, but have consequences.

We think kids should make a list of people they feel afraid of and hand it to their teacher.

Bullying is way worse than having your feelings hurt. When you don't feel like you belong, or when you're afraid to come to school, it's serious.

For some kids, it's like a habit. They don't listen when we say stop. It feels like they've stopped using their heart.

After I took notes on their thoughts, I read them back to see if I'd captured the essence on paper. We talked about how to add in their voices and began our first Better Together assembly by having their words read by a team of student narrators. Their voices were very important.

This book contains many modalities for responding to these requests. At the assembly, we followed their statements with the song, *Sing About Us* (Song 32). It says: "You don't have to be just like me to be my friend." Music makes sure that people don't stop using their hearts. Let's look at why it's one of the ways to help change behaviors that harm.

Songs are visitors. In a moment a new thought is expressed and a conversation is started. The rhythm holds the idea, and it's easy to recall. What do you want other people to understand? A song can telegraph this.

"When children repeat songs, they are *refeeding* the message to themselves," therapist Sydney Thorn from Northampton, MA explains. "That's how songs help. When you sing words that give guidance, instead of saying them, they become encoded in your brain in a different way. They can be more digestible and have a broader emotional impact. Music creates a direct link with the unconscious."

From time immemorial people have been moved to sing out their hopes and intentions, and celebrate their basic connection to all that lives. Orpingalik, a Netsilik Inuit leader said:

"Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices... It will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves, we get a new song."

-- Orpingalik in *Teaching Spirits*, Joseph Epes Brown

Themes

The set of forty songs are grouped into five themes, five facets of best practices in being Better Together. Here are highlights.

Chapter One -The Embrace of Community:

Song 5—*Freeman* -- A song about the Birmingham Children’s Crusade during the Civil Rights Movement tells the true story of a courageous twelve-year-old.

Song 6—*Help Comes*—When there is a calamity like a fire or hurricane or other kind of loss, this song gives a positive message that people want to be there to pitch in and help.

Chapter Two -How to Talk It Out

Song 8—*Talk It Out* --A Cajun band backs up this lively song which acknowledges the times that it is difficult to communicate. The fast beat helps to convey the anxiety of being in a conflict.

Song 9—*Just in This Moment*—Seven teachers collaborated to create a song that talks about supportive conversations that can help our life take a different turn.

Chapter Three - Being Part of a Circle

Song 19—*Tree of Life* –This song begins with the word for “peace” in many languages, and says we take part in the circle of caring generations.

Chapter Four - Step in, and Make it Better

Song 22 – *Believe* – At fourteen Isolina Leiva-Bowes wrote a poem while she sat in the forest at Journey Camp in Deerfield, MA that has since been sung at schools, folk festivals, a family reunion, a bar mitzvah, and other community gatherings.

Song 24– *Náměšť* by Jaroslav Hutka– Lenka Zbruz and her four-year-old son Filip sing a historic Czech peace song that Lenka learned in the Czech Republic when she was twelve. The English translation of *Náměšť* is Song 25.

Chapter Five - Adding Your Own Voice – Language Arts

Song 31 – *The Sun Inside Us* – The message that the song shares is, “You’re so strong, you’re so smart, you were born with the loving heart.” The activity section explains how to use this and other songs in the chapter for creative writing.

WHY IT’S WORTH IT

“Aren’t you taking time away from teaching when you stop to help children talk out conflicts? And now you’re using songs, too?”

This *is* teaching. Children need our assistance in developing the ability to negotiate social situations, handle strong feelings, and learn how to be a caring member of a group. The time that we take to help children with the social curriculum is invaluable for strengthening our classroom learning community. Music supports this work in unique and powerful ways. Here are two educators talking about this topic.

Debbie Rubenzahl, former family counselor at North Parish School in Greenfield, MA asserted, “Children need a non-threatening way to talk about feelings and basic values. Music is an ideal vehicle for working indirectly on personal and family issues. It appeals to children’s love of fun and also can speak to real-life skills. Songs can zoom in on important themes in childhood.”

Jill Person, an expert on educational materials and the director of A Gentle Wind recordings for children in Albany, NY, made these observations: “Kids are coming into school more upset and more vulnerable than ever before. At the same time teachers have less time for anything besides the things that are on the test. There is less time to sing, and there is less time for addressing emotional crises. Yet I’ve seen how **introducing a song can make a difference in new understanding. It’s worthwhile to add in those three minutes and see how effective it can be.**”

To be human is to be a music maker. Music charges the brain. Music helps us think in many dimensions. Music combines intelligences. Engaging with music we are developing our social self, our mathematical sense of patterning, our intrapersonal self, and our linguistic intelligence. Music is a kind of social medicine that bonds, nourishes, and promotes learning.

Bringing Language Arts and Social Skills Together

A special feature of *Better Together* is that it is specifically designed to support language arts by fostering reading, writing, and self-expression. These songs aim to make accessible to preK-6th teachers and parents clear messages that focus new behavior with words crafted to keep positive directions in the forefront. They can be incorporated into academic activities.

Sample Chapter Page

CHAPTER TWO

HOW TO TALK IT OUT

I want to share my excitement for helping children learn how to have reciprocal interactions where they respond to other people, where the needs of others are real for them, and where they buy into the support of group agreements. Sitting down to talk it out is an opportunity for a shift in understanding.

Talking it out involves willingness to interact and have an exchange. It takes a conflict or problem to a different place.

Work it out. Talk it out. In this book these terms are interchangeable. These phrases signal that you are holding children in that place of caring communication.

Let's work this out.

I want to see if we can understand each other.

Will you talk it out with me?

When I began working with Leeds Elementary School, I set up time at a staff meeting for the group to decide what name they wanted to give the process of clear communication. I said, "I use the phrase *Talk It Out* to describe it, but I want you to be able to choose the wording that rings truest for you." A long discussion followed in small groups so that each person could be heard and talk candidly. They thought about the formal and informal ways that people improve a situation with more understanding, and they chose to expand the term and call it *Work it out*.

Constructive communication has a framework and certain qualities of interaction. It's helpful both to internalize the specific sequence and also to be able to apply it flexibly. Every situation is unique. There's not one classic conflict and one clear road to stay on to solve it.

Chapter Two has 16 pages of details about how to support constructive conversations.

Two Sample Songs

Song 3. Oops

Source: Words and music by Sarah Pirtle,
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Focus: The word “oops” helps increase awareness of social mistakes and encourages growth.
Ages: ages 4 to 12

Lyrics: **The Oops Song**

1. Have you noticed a time that you left someone out?
OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS
Have you started a joke and then realized it hurts?
OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS

Refrain: How can you find a way to mend?
How can you work it out with your friend
When there’s an OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS

2. Did someone get pushed when you were moving so fast?
OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS
Did someone feel hurt when you blurted those words?
OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS

Refrain: How can you find a way to mend?
How can you work it out with your friend
When there’s an OOPS, OOPS, OOPS, OOPS

Recording artists: My son Ryan Pirtle-McVeigh joined me on vocals and guitar.

ACTIVITIES

Listen, Draw, and Affirm

Talk about examples of making a social mistake. For instance, someone gets accidentally hurt, or slips and someone else laughs. Is the laughter a mistake? Why or why not?

Bring up social mistakes that are generic as well as situations that have happened in the group, talking about the incident and not about the specific people involved. After there are several examples, ask students to draw a two-frame cartoon. Show the problem and show someone realizing it’s a problem and saying, “oops.”

Discussion Question

Can you think of a time when you or someone you know did something that feels like a mistake?

Bring up specifics. e.g. Why do people laugh when someone else gets hurt? Why do people laugh when someone is making fun of others? How can we catch ourselves and not laugh?

Would it help to say, oops, to show it was a mistake and not something we want to keep on doing?

The Story Behind the Song:

While teaching at New Hingham Elementary School in western Massachusetts in 1998, I was looking for a way to give a social signal. I introduced the expression – oops – to indicate that a social mistake had been made and ask that the student address what had just occurred and make a change.

This practice was inspired by Daniel Gartrell’s work. He reorients early childhood teachers to see inappropriate behavior not as misbehaving but making social mistakes. He coined the phrase, *mistaken behavior*. See his book *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom* (New York: Delmar, 1998).

Song 6. Help Comes

Source: Words and music by Sarah Pirtle, © 2011 Discovery Center Music, BMI

Focus: After a personal or community calamity, children can notice how other people come forward and reach out to help.

Age: PreK-6th

Lyrics: **Help Comes**

Chorus: Help comes when you need it.

Help comes when you call.

Help comes when you’re hurt

And help comes when you fall.

Look around. People care.

Yes, people will be there.

Verses: (repeat each pair of words)

1. I will stick by you, you can count on me.

We make a circle that is strong.

2. When you stumble, I will pick you up.
We make a circle that is strong.

Additional words for verses:

When my neighbor calls, I will answer. (a line from a traditional Appalachian song)
We make a circle that is strong.

If you are hurt, we will listen and help
We make a circle that is strong.

Draw, Listen, and Affirm

Draw a person who the song could be referring to, a person who needs help, perhaps a person who is upset or sad, or who has had a loss.

By allowing children to create the picture they need to make, we can see what they are worried about or what they have experienced. The words give consolation.

Discuss together what the pictures are conveying.

Discussion Question

Help comes through our actions and our intentions. Tell about a time you are aware of when someone you know or someone you heard about helped someone else in need.

This doesn't have to relate to a calamity. Teenage brothers Theo and Allen Gabriel said that their favorite time of the year was pie-making night. Their mother Christina Gabriel organizes a giant collaboration of neighbors helping to raise money for the South Ashfield Library in rural Massachusetts by creating apple pies together. One room of people peel and slice apples from a local orchard, others mix in cinnamon and sugar. After a group works on rolling out and placing bottom crust in pie tins, children use giant spoons to scoop the sugary apples. Finally a top crust is made from dough. The team created 171 pies in one evening in 2011 to be sold at the Ashfield Fall Festival, anticipating raising \$3,600.

Work with the examples that come forward and make up new verses.

e.g. In an urban area teenagers gathered up food in their neighborhood when the stocks of the local food pantry were low. Take a phrase from the story and use it for the verse, like:

When people need food, we will share food with them.
We make a circle that is strong.

Joseph Smith, Principal of Leeds Elementary School, MA, says, “I want students who graduate from this school to be able to participate in community. I want them to be able to support a person in need without criticizing them or ostracizing them.”

Follow-up

Start a bulletin board that shows clippings from the newspaper of people helping others.

Collect stories. During Hurricane Irene in New England, there were many instances of support. When two towns in mid-Vermont were ravaged by flood waters, a man with a horse found out who in the towns needed their medical prescriptions filled to maintain their health. With the information in a back pack, he set out through the waters on horseback to get to a pharmacy in another town. At times the water was up to his horse’s neck, but he kept on going, got what was needed, and delivered the medical supplies to those waiting for them.

In another Vermont town, teenagers on bikes went through the flood waters to get prescriptions from a pharmacy. In the Brattleboro area at a trailer park on the edge of a stream, a man went into the trailers to see what help he could offer. He helped out animals who were trapped, rescued people in the water, purchased food and brought it to people in a nearby town who couldn’t get out.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

THE EMBRACE OF COMMUNITY

How can we create a circle where new members are welcomed and where festering problems have an avenue to be worked through? When we are explicit about our expectations, we help hold a group as if we have our arms around the room saying here is what will and won’t happen here.

As adults we activate the social agreements and help children stay inside them. We want places where new children are welcomed not made to fight for a place in a pecking order. We want children to have assistance with the complexities of friendships, the inequalities in life, and feelings of hurt and upset. Standards of what is and is not okay need to be set clearly. Children need to know where they stand and how they can learn. In addition, they need to feel they are accepted and given room for growth. This is the embrace of community.

The book contains advice about specific agreements and how to set them, how to lead talk-it-out dialogues, and how adults and young people can intervene when there’s mistreatment or bias. It discusses how to support children with compassion and accountability in their growth whether they were the harm-doer, were targeted, or were a bystander.