



PLAY:

A Way to Prepare for Learning and for Life

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The global pandemic has made one thing more evident: resilience and the ability to adapt to difficult situations is crucial for students and educators alike.

It has never been more necessary to embed the Core Competencies of our curriculum to ensure students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 are equipped with the skills to communicate, cooperate, collaborate, think creatively, problem solve and express themselves with cultural awareness and sensitivity. Doing so will give us every reason to believe that our students will be well prepared for learning and for life, now and into the future.

Additionally, increasing our commitment to developing the personal and social competencies of our children is the best pathway to improving and protecting their mental health and well-being. Is this necessary? Well, I'll let the numbers do the talking.

- 13% of Canadian students have anxiety disorders (Kutcher, 2014)
- 10% have disruptive mood disorders (Kutcher, 2014)
- 90% of teachers report that mental health issues are their biggest classroom concern (Canadian Teachers Federation Survey, 2015)
- 95% of Principals feel that a child's mental health and well-being is one of the most important factors to plan for in their schools (Lunn, 2015)

About 5 years ago, Merritt Central Elementary School went headfirst into Carol Dweck's work around Growth Mindset. We used it in conjunction with the following promising programs: Zones of Regulation – Mind-up – Friends – Roots of Empathy.

These programs were undeniably helpful, but our students needed more and we needed something to tie it all together. Our students needed a hands-on, engaging way to acquire the social and emotional skills required for learning and life – a way to habituate them by physically and interactively practicing them.

The teaching staff needed this as well because too much teaching time was being lost to the one-to-one placation of students who too frequently lost control of their behaviour. Thankfully, I had a compassionate and professional staff who were willing to give students this time, and who needed no reminders that relationships and connection were always the priority.

When our kids were calm, they could easily identify how

they were feeling, or what soothing strategy to pull out of their tool belts, and some students were indeed able to transfer the skills learned in Zones and Mind-up into many situations in the classroom, hallway or the playground. The majority, however, could not.

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Almost by chance, two of my senior teachers happened to go to a Play Is the Way® workshop and couldn't stop raving about how it just brought everything together and had the perfect framework for developing all the characteristics we wanted to see in our kids. Importantly, the Core Competencies aligned directly with the Play Is the Way® behaviour education philosophy, theory and practice.



Kelowna Workshop ©Play Is The Way



I do not believe anyone can argue the point that play, as a catalyst for learning, is the 'holy grail'. There is nothing better at engaging kids in their own growth and learning than play.

The Play Is The Way® difference is that it is not free play, but rather a purposeful play that utilizes unique games and activities with the aim of developing 'empathetic, inclusive, independent, self-managing and self-motivated lifelong learners'.



Play Is The Way® changed the culture of our school and made behaviour a subject to be taught and not a problem to be managed. Within ten months, Play Is The Way® brought us from roughly 30 referrals a day down to almost none.

For the first time in ten years of being an administrator, I had complete confidence in the social emotional well-being of my students. I also had teachers who were more relaxed, motivated, and generally happier.



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Fast forward to 2020, and Play Is The Way® has been having the same impact in schools all over the province, from Fort St John, Sparwood and Kelowna, to Vancouver, Prince George, Duncan and beyond. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, I had workshops planned in Alberta and Manitoba, while I was in the initial stages of working out a plan for a school in Nigeria! Play Is The Way® is thriving in Australia and New Zealand for the same reasons.



I am most proud of the Indigenization of the Play Is The Way® methodology. It is inclusive of all Ministry and Federal expectations in terms of Truth and Reconciliation education, and fully meets all professional development requirements in B.C. I worked with a local Aboriginal artist to develop our Aboriginal Key Concept posters, along with elders and resource people to incorporate stories and teachings around inclusivity and character development. It has been a humbling and deeply rewarding journey, and I thank all those who have contributed to my education in these matters.



As you can tell, I am impressed and uplifted by the impact this Australian behaviour education methodology had on my former Elementary school (and now my high school – yes a high school!), and I believe that it can be of equal or greater benefit for schools throughout this great province and beyond.