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THE  
**COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

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## **NEWSLETTER**

### **October 2, 2006**

#### **Director's Commentary: Unique Perspectives?**

Although I always prepare for the unexpected, I am often surprised by the unusual perspectives the kids have on the issues and events of their lives. For example, one student recently got upset that someone was trying to take a photograph of him: "Pictures steal your soul." Another student got tired on the trail and commented: "I don't want help. There's no point. I'd rather die." Many of the students have worries and anxieties that play out in odd ways because of extreme, "distorted" ways of experiencing them. I put the word "distorted" in quotes because, to most of us, these perspectives seem distorted. To the student himself, there is no distortion. It is frequently, though not always, easy to tell how deadly serious a student is when expressing these kinds of views, and how much he believes in what he is saying.

The overwhelming tendency of most adults—even skilled, supportive ones—is to respond to students with cognitive coping strategies. These strategies include telling the student that his reaction is unnecessarily extreme, explaining why the experience is not really as bad as it feels, and teaching the student a different way to do it next time. These kinds of comments don't provide "bad" information necessarily, but in the moment of distress, learning of this kind is almost completely unavailable to the student. A rough analogy might be hitting yourself on the thumb with a hammer and having people say, "Oh, I've done that, it doesn't hurt that bad", or "Next time don't put your thumb there", or "You don't need to cry about it".

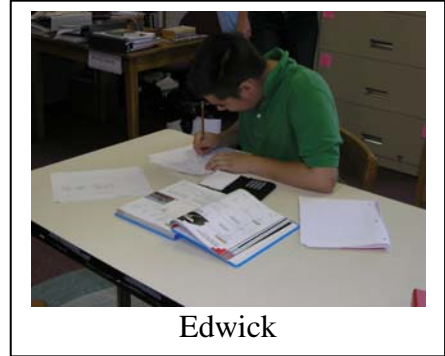


The Group at "Judgment Rock"

So, if explaining things to the student isn't helpful, what kind of response is warranted? In the initial moment, it's almost always going to be empathy. As adults, we have to work extremely hard to try to put ourselves in the student's shoes. Often, because the student's experience is so different from our own, we will have a hard time appreciating this experience. My advice in these moments is to suspend your own logic (and judgment). Say empathetic things even when you don't understand. And, as a student begins to calm down, ask gentle questions to enable you to understand his experience better. Sometimes you'll find an amazing train of logic in your



kid's mind that leads back to a really legitimate concern. Here is one example that I don't yet know to be true, but even if it isn't exactly true, it will demonstrate my point. A student secretly stops taking his medication because it makes him groggy in the morning and his mother lets him drink a soda in the morning but sometimes he is still drinking the soda when he gets to school and teachers always ask him about in mildly judgmental ways and other kids always remind him that there is a school rule against sodas, and he hates the teachers and students always making comments. This is an extremely logical train of thought, at least on some level. It may ignore certain parts of a shared social experience (i.e., that talking to people about what you're thinking enables you to learn new ways of understanding things, and/or to come up with a wider variety of solutions).



Edwick

Now, the student himself may not even know this is what's going on, so it isn't always easy for adults to figure it out either. Sometimes it's helpful to just keep reminding yourself that, whatever your child is saying or doing, *he* probably has a good reason for it in his own framework. (I recently had a student approach me and ask me if I was carrying my camera or any electronics on me. Not thinking about my cell phone, I said "No." He proceeded to pour a bottle of water on my head. At first, this entire event seemed illogical, and I thought he was angry with me. I blurted out, "What did you do that for??!!" The student, somewhat taken aback at my reaction, replied that he was trying to play a practical joke on me, but didn't want to ruin any of my electronics.)

In that example, my water-pouring student was simply trying to play a practical joke. Many times, kids are struggling with more difficult emotions, including anger, disappointment, and worries about self-worth. The best response we can have in these moments of stress is to try to reflect what we think the individual might be feeling. If we (as the supportive adults) don't have a lot of comfort in dealing with the feelings the student is having, then it will be more challenging for us to respond in sympathetic ways, but it is important to try to stay present, not projecting our own discomfort onto the child.

Our culture is fast-paced and success-oriented, leading us to want to solve problems quickly, explaining to a child how to make sure [whatever] doesn't happen again. We have a tendency to overlook the fact that getting comfortable with a wide range of emotions, especially the difficult ones, is an essential skill. We really can't keep each other from experiencing pain; our efforts will be more productive if we focus primarily on helping kids anticipate pain and productively manage the feelings that come with it. Our best tool here is empathy.

### Notes from Deven Greene

Stephen, Nick, and Will begin each day in homeroom, which we have affectionately been calling "Morning Mindtrap Meeting." They arrive each day eager to try new Mindtrap logic puzzles and I have yet to stump the group. They are slowly becoming a more cohesive trio through teaching

each other strategies for solving these elusive puzzles. In turn, they are discovering how to be patient when faced with opposing ideas from another. During an exchange earlier in the week, I watched as Nick presented a puzzle on the board, Stephen instructed how to write out the answer, and Will encouraged Stephen with "don't worry it's sometimes hard for me to see the answer too." Upcoming homeroom challenges will include designing their own Mindtrap puzzles and presenting them to each other. I am looking forward to what lies ahead for this homeroom group. In the meantime, here are two Mindtrap puzzles from Stephen, Nick, and Will to the readers:

**Q:** Forward I'm heavy, backward I'm not. What am I?

**Q:** Mr. and Mrs. Clatter have five children. Half of them are boys. How is this possible?

Look for the answers in next week's newsletter!

Kenny and I have been reading *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. This is an exciting story about a young man who hitchhiked from Georgia to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness on a mission to find a transcendent experience in nature. The protagonist, Chris McCandless, donated all of his savings to charity, burned all of the money in his wallet, gave away all of his possessions, abandoned his car, and off he went. Kenny and I have been studying themes of friendship, loneliness, love, and loss through learning about this young man's life. Kenny's knowledge of Boy Scouts has come in handy, as he has offered much hypothetical advice to Chris such as, "be prepared" and "he should have studied the climate for better preparation!" One of the challenges of this book has been the sequencing, as it jumps around from year to year and location to location. We have discovered that, via charting the journey on a wall map, the main events can be sifted through more easily. Kenny is looking forward to preparing a presentation of the book for Parent Day on October 11.

Alex is moving quickly and enthusiastically through his math curriculum. Whether we are reviewing estimation with budgets and trips to the store for school supplies, or embarking on "write your own word problem" challenges, Alex has been working through concepts with ease. A recent lesson which seemed initially challenging became fun and interesting when Alex made up the mnemonic device "**P**igs **E**at **M**eat **D**og **A**nd **S**ausage" to help him remember the order of operations. I continue to work towards helping Alex work through steps aloud as problems become more challenging. In addition, I continue to encourage Alex to recognize that there is sometimes more than one way to finding a solution, both with his math and with his everyday challenges.

### **Rafting Trip Details**

By Jen Bertasi

Last Thursday Armann and I took the following students on a rafting trip down the Chattahoochee River: Ryan, Nick, Stephen, John, Kenny, and Alex. The trip lasted approx. 1 ½ hours – and I think it is fair to say that as guides, Armann and I were very impressed and excited about how the boys worked together to navigate their way down the river. All the boys were in the raft (a LARGE raft) with Armann, while I played "Sherpani" and canoed along-side with their bags. The boys were in close quarters and had to use a good deal of teamwork to not only navigate, but to prevent splashing each other and getting their paddles tangled. We were quite pleased with the willingness to all work together. And even when the raft did not necessarily go where they wanted it to there was little, if any, blaming or frustration with each other. It was as if the task at hand consumed so much of their attention and energy they had little left to do anything *but* work together.



Alex in Mid Air

We took a couple of swim breaks – and even stopped at Jumping Rock to allow those who wanted to take a plunge off the rock. Armann and Alex were the only one who took advantage of this – and thanks to Armann's camera-phone I was able to get a great picture of Alex in mid-air.

Stamina did come into play (or lack-there-of) a bit at the end, as most of the guys needed a bit of encouragement during the last 10 minutes or so to continue rowing, but with a little rhythm provided by Armann, all were all willing to sweat it out.

All-in-all I think everyone had a great day...and I would imagine that they slept well that night!

### Thursday Update

Today's hike at Vickery Creek was a bit more challenging than our previous hikes at Ford's Island. While a couple of the guys protested some and seemed to have a bit of a time adjusting to the increased physical demands, we were quite pleased with the overall willingness and participation when it was all said-and-done. For instance, Edwick was quite displeased to find that we would begin the morning with an *uphill* walk, and Stephen became somewhat tired towards the end of the hike and needed some extra support and



Karate

encouragement to continue...yet in the end, all of the boys not only completed the hike, but could be spotted bantering, conversing, and joking with each other throughout the day, just as if they were at the other 'easier' hike. This is in sharp contrast to last year, when this hike had to be aborted all together because the physical demands were too high. Most likely some of the initial resistance was caused just as much by the emotional reactions to the change in schedule as the actual changes themselves.

Clearly the boys' physical stamina is higher than they think it is, as they all had plenty of energy after hiking to participate in a rather active Karate class. This was our first week of karate; while there was some initial trepidation about participating, all but one student ended up on the mats. And perhaps we shouldn't tell them all, but they all looked like they were having fun! Students could be seen watching themselves intently in the mirror as they practiced their kicks and blocks, and watching/supporting each other as, one-by-one, each student performed his routine for the class. Feedback from most of the students afterwards was a "thumbs-up" for the day, with a request for fewer hills next week. Although it remains to be seen if their request will be granted!

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- The Parent Handbook has been updated and is available on the website.
- This week's Thursday drop off is at Vickery Creek. Pick up is at Dojo Karate on Crossville Road in Roswell.
- Mark your calendars now for our first Family Day at school, Wednesday, October 11. Parent conferences, student presentations, and several special activities during the school day. Parents, please plan to attend.