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- CLASSIFIEDS

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ISTHMUS PARENTS

Hancock Center addresses bullying through body movement

Ending school violence

[Carrie Anton](#) on Thursday 03/06/2014

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1 image

It's Wednesday morning at Allis Elementary School on Madison's east side, and 16 third-graders -- 10 boys and six girls -- enter into an open-space classroom in typical wiggly, giggly style. Some are making goofy faces at one another, some are bouncing around hand-in-hand with friends, and others are just trying to stay out of the whirling-dervish path of activity.

Settling this group would normally seem a tall order, but once the children are instructed to sit in a large circle and to clear their minds, the antsy energy appears to vanish. The students, some with developmental disabilities, have all eyes on the "ooze tube," a liquid gel drip version of an hourglass that visually encourages relaxation. Those who can't quite reach complete calm put their hands on their heads to help. Within minutes, the room goes from playground-style pandemonium to a state of Zen not commonly associated with a grade-school classroom.

Even when "distractors" are put into play -- four kids instructed to run around the outside of the circle making noises and trying to engage other students in their antics-- the seated students maintain their stillness effortlessly. An outside observer might assume meditation has been added to the curriculum, given the group's controlled breathing and steady gaze.

However, students at Allis and six other public schools are not on a quest for transcendence. Instead, they're participating in a program designed by Hancock Center for Dance/Movement Therapy, Inc.

Movement helps kids with strength, confidence, adjustment.

Credit:Robyn Lending Halsten

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they're participating in a program designed by Hancock Center for Dance/Movement Therapy Inc., a Madison nonprofit organization, to end school violence.

Hancock Center, founded in 1983 by Deborah Thomas, provides psychotherapy through dance/movement therapy (DMT) and health and wellness education. The seven staff therapists are

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nationally board-certified and licensed by the state of Wisconsin to practice psychotherapy.

When visiting the center at 16 N. Hancock St., don't expect the open studio spaces to be lined with mirrors or barres, or to witness the waltz being broken down by eight counts. DMT isn't about dance instruction or movement aesthetic, but about the role the body and mind play in health and illness.

In 1993, Hancock Center began providing movement therapy techniques in an abuse prevention and therapy program at Lapham Elementary School. Traumatized and at-risk students were in need of mental health services to which they didn't readily have access.

The program's focus was to provide children who were victims of physical, sexual and domestic abuse a safe place for communicating feelings, skills for developing self-control, and a shared community based on trust. Participants learned healthy social skills and mind-body techniques to respond to a range of emotions.

While the skills were crucial to the at-risk students, it became evident that all children could benefit from them. After discussions with teachers, Rena Kornblum, the center's executive director, developed the "In-School Violence Prevention and Therapy Program." In the transition from at-risk students to the general school population, bullying became the focus.

"Every one could understand bullying on some level," says Kornblum.

When asked how many bullies were in their school, another group of Allis Elementary third-graders responded with "lots" and cast their arms wide open to signify a large amount.

But the program isn't intended just for the "bad kid." Every one -- targets and witnesses included -- learns how to actively keep themselves and their peers safe. The bully can walk away with calming techniques when anger erupts. The target can learn "prevention interventions," such as how making a joke or giving a compliment can help when dealing with a bully directly. And the witness can walk away with tools to support a friend in need.

Kornblum's curriculum, "Disarming the Playground: Violence Prevention through Movement and Pro-Social Skills," uses movement to teach mental concepts.

While the therapists and teachers meet in advance to determine the skills that would be most beneficial for a particular group, one skill all students will likely learn are "The Four Bs of Self-Settling." The phrase "Brakes, Breathing, Brain and Body" prompts children to use movement to calm themselves, control anger and impulses and reduce energy.

The in-class sessions tackle problem-solving, anger, empathy, peer pressure and alienation using fun props such as stretch cloth bands, squishy rubber balls and nylon parachutes. Children find positive connections with each other in ways that simply feel like play. Violence prevention is the goal, but the techniques will ultimately help kids respond to the stresses of daily life in healthy ways -- a must




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The curriculum's groundwork is the same for the seven schools currently using the program, but it can be fine-tuned to meet the needs of the group.

"There is an organic nature to our work," says dance/movement therapist Ann Wingate. "We respond in the moment to the needs of individuals and classrooms."

Along with Kornblum and Wingate, Hancock Center DMT therapists Jeanine Kiss and Mariah Meyer LeFeber are responsible for teaching. And the classroom teachers also play a vital role. Teachers can integrate the program's vocabulary into everyday activities, such as lining up for recess, working in group settings, or sitting in close spaces for school presentations, Kornblum explains.

Parents, too, are invited to attend and observe the skills their children are learning. They also receive regular letters and handouts to help families use the program's tools outside of school.

Kornblum and her staff recognize that reducing bullying requires large-scale social change beyond the program's scope. However, the movement therapy aids in the development of social skills, responses to stress and self-confidence -- the groundwork for safe school communities.

Hancock Center for Dance/Movement Therapy

16 N. Hancock St., 608-251-0908, hancockcenter.net

Hancock Center offers individual and group sessions focusing on body-mind health for children, adults and families. Education, wellness and outreach workshops also available.

Spring workshops and programs include Empowerment through Movement, March 18, a workshop for teens at the Wisconsin Summit on Healthy Teen Relationships, held in Baraboo; and Healing through Music and Dance/Movement Therapy, April 25, 4-6 p.m., an open house and short program for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The short program (4:30-5:30 p.m.) will show how these therapies are used with survivors of sexual assault, including demonstrated exercises that develop self-esteem, trust and playful outlets for self-expression. RSVP appreciated.

Disarming the Playground books and DVDs are available for order.



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