



CODA Educator Jennifer Morley at the Malvern After School Intergenerational Program

From November 2008 to February 2009 I had the privilege of facilitating an eight week drug prevention program at the Malvern After School Intergenerational Program (MASIP). The program is housed in a church in the Malvern area of Toronto, an area of the city that gained a lot of media attention for violence and gang activity several years ago. It is funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation, Parkdale Golden Age Foundation, New Horizons for Seniors, African Canadian and Caribbean Heart Health Education and The Toronto Diocesan Anglican Women.

At first glance it seems like the After School Program is a just a great place for neighbourhood kids from Kindergarten to grade 8 to go for a hot meal and something to do after school, but there is much more than this going on at the Malvern After School Intergenerational Program. The program offers homework support facilitated by Toronto District School Board teachers and the curriculum is enriched with dance, drama and music.

The program's goals are to decrease community violence and build academic and social skills as well as self-confidence in children, youth and families who are not always reached by traditional programs. Despite the negative media attention this area of the city has garnered, program staff and volunteers have done everything in their power to ensure that a new generation of kids is being nurtured, guided and encouraged to fulfill their potential at MASIP.

The program is coordinated by Eunice Chaderton-Downes, a no-nonsense woman of good old-fashioned values. Mrs. Downes, as the kids call her, believes wholeheartedly in the program and in the children that attend it, and her dedication shows in her every interaction with the children. She expects nothing but the best of the kids in her care and she demands that they work hard and show respect for themselves and for others. Supporting Mrs. Downes are kitchen staff (affectionately called Aunties) who prepare hot, nourishing meals for the kids and a whole host of volunteers, both students and adults.

It was Eunice Downes' idea to offer drug abuse prevention education for the kids who attend MASIP. She had already given the kids some education about drug misuse but she wanted to bring in an outside agency to make sure the kids got all the information they needed. That's when she contacted CODA.

When I was first approached about teaching this program I was excited and a little nervous. Although I've been a CODA educator for three years, I've only delivered the program as a one-time meeting to kids who are in the same grade. The idea of developing and delivering 8 weeks of programming to kids from Kindergarten to Grade 8 was a little daunting. I needed to make sure that I had enough material, but more importantly I had to make sure it was relevant to such a wide range of ages.

As an educator you never really know what to expect when you walk into a group of children. Each group has its own unique dynamic. The level of energy, enthusiasm for the material and willingness to participate really varies from group to group. The first time I walked into the After School Program I knew I had found a special place. The staff was welcoming and the children were curious and eager to learn.

There were about 20 kids at my first meeting, ranging in age from 5 to 13. I introduced myself and the CODA

program and we got to know each other a bit by playing a few “warm up” games. Then I introduced the “question box”, which was simply an old tissue box that I had decorated with markers and stickers. The idea was that the question box would remain at MASIP for the duration of the 8 week program. I invited the kids to anonymously place questions they had about drugs into the question box and each week I would read out the questions that had been submitted. This allowed kids who were too shy or embarrassed to ask questions in front of the group a chance to get the information that they needed.

After the games I gave the kids a pile of markers, a bunch of colourful stickers and a blank name tag that they could decorate and write their names on. Since most kids love stickers and markers the project was a hit and I kept the names tags at the program so the kids could wear them each week.

After the first two meetings it became clear that the age range of the group was really too wide for me to teach them effectively. Mrs. Downes was quite flexible and allowed me to split the group into two smaller groups: one composed of kids in Kindergarten to Grade 3 and one composed of kids in Grade 4 and up. Splitting the groups this way allowed me to tailor each lesson more appropriately to the level of the learners. Every week I met with each subgroup of kids for a short discussion, which was followed by a worksheet that the kids completed in order to reinforce the lesson. Activities for the younger kids often involved drawing pictures about what we had discussed, while the older kids activities typically involved answering questions about how the topic was applicable in their own life.

We covered a number of different topics over the 8 weeks including: what is a drug, prescription and over the counter medication, alcohol, smoking, coping with stress, asking for help, and ways to support a friend. By the end of the 8 weeks I was starting to wonder “how am I going to leave?” I had developed warm feelings for the kids and always left MASIP feeling fulfilled and energized about the good connection I had made with the children. I even contemplated asking Mrs. Downes if I could come back as a volunteer so that I could continue building the relationships I had nurtured with these kids.

On my last day of the program I was presented with a mug and a hand drawn card from each of the kids that spelled out exactly what they liked about the 8 weeks we had spent together. Many of the kids talked about having fun, learning a lot and discovering how important it is to avoid drugs.

Participating in this program verified my belief that meeting with the same group of kids over several sessions has many benefits. In between lessons kids have the opportunity to try out some of the skills they have learned then come back and talk to the group about how they worked in the “real world.” Kids also have time to think about questions that might not have occurred to them during the first lesson. But most importantly, meeting with the same group of children over several sessions allows for a relationship to form between the educator and the students. This builds trust, comfort and openness, which facilitates the interaction in the group and allows the lessons to be absorbed much more deeply.

Eighty percent of the kids who evaluated the program we delivered at MASIP strongly agreed with the statement “After learning from this presentation I am more likely to make careful decisions about taking drugs.” The other 20% agreed with the statement. Those numbers speak volumes about the success of this pilot project. I can only hope the next project I undertake with CODA nearly as fulfilling and rewarding as this one was.