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FOURTH R MAY HELP CURB SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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As the first educators, parents play the most important role in a young child's life. From them, a child learns how to read, how to tie her shoes and why "please" and "thank you" are important words. Usually, a child also learns that hitting is not a good way of communicating.

What happens, then, when a child is raised in a home where hitting is the norm, and violence and abusive language are a part of the child's every-day lessons? In many cases, that child is likely to adopt a similar behaviour.

A program now running in local high schools was created to help stop the cycle of violence. The program is called the Fourth R, with the R standing for relationships. Program creators believe that should be an integral part of school curriculum, along with the more traditional three Rs.

David Wolfe believes the triad of sexuality, substance abuse and relationships are all connected and need to be taught that way. While there has been education on safe sex and substance abuse in physical education and health classes, the focus on personal safety and relationships has been missing until now.

As director of the London-based Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, Wolfe pulled together a team of educators to create the Fourth R, which integrated the three topics with the aim of allowing students to see the connections and make healthy relationship choices.

The program originated out of the Youth Relationships Project with the Children's Aid Society. That program was geared toward youth aged 13 to 15 who came from abusive or violent homes and was considered a success, meaning it saw less abuse and violence occurring among the teen participants toward their dating partners.

"It demonstrated what we were hoping -- that we can change the patterns (of behaviour) in these kids," said Wolfe.

The Fourth R is running in half of the Thames Valley District school board secondary schools, with the other half acting as controls. It is taught in the health segments of the required Grade 9 health and physical education class.

"(Grade 9 is) a very critical year," said Wolfe. "We could do it earlier but they're not ready for it in Grade 8. (In Grade 9) they're just starting to date and they are much more likely to have a romantic partner, start sexual behaviour and substance abuse."

In addition to the curriculum itself, the way the class is taught and the hands-on work that the students do are key innovations.

"We do a lot of role playing where the kids get to try to use their relationship skills in different situations," said Mike Bates, a teacher at Westminster secondary school who is now teaching the Fourth R for the second time. He believes that the message of the program and the way it is taught will allow for a better chance at changed behaviour.

"In the past, the curriculum has been geared to 'Drugs are bad for you, sex is bad for you. Just say no.' You're not really preparing them for the pressures they're going to face. The difference with this is still giving knowledge, but 'How are you going to say no?' I give the scenarios and they create the dialogue based on the techniques they're learning. So they actually have a chance to say no in real situations."

Students themselves have responded well, said Bates. "Initially, they were a little hesitant when it came to role-playing." But by the time the students near the end of the three eight-day units, they have practised it at least four to six times. "By the end, they have a lot of fun with it."

The real test will come in the next few years as the results of the new curriculum are assessed to determine whether there is a change in behaviour and decision-making when it comes to making healthy relationship choices. For now, it is a giant step forward in opening systematic dialogue on violence and abusive relationships in young people.

The next step is to work on educating their parents.