

## Kids Helping Kids Help Themselves



Photo: Kelli Uldall

**Carmel River School counselor Jan Day trains 4th graders like Helen and Isabelle to act as peer Conflict Managers.**

**A**t Carmel River School, kids in kindergarten through first grade play on brightly colored structures, skipping rope, shooting low-level baskets, and trying to catch kickballs their classmates fire at them. Kids in second through fifth grades roam on a larger playground with a soccer field, a track, a climbing "rock," tetherball stations and basketball courts.

But during recess, against the tranquil backdrop of the Carmel River Lagoon dotted with grazing sheep, sometimes the scene can get a little loud.

Like kids everywhere, sometimes River School kids get into arguments. But unlike the old days, where name-calling, teasing, and taunting invariably resulted in hurt feelings, low self-esteem and pent-up rage, River School kids have another option.

The Conflict Manager program, run by School Counselor Jan Day, offers peer support to coach kids into listening to each other, expressing their feelings, and finding a resolution to their conflict. (The program is run by another counselor at Carmel Unified's other two elementary schools.)

Day says that while there are very few significant discipline problems at River School, kids who take advantage of the support of Conflict

Managers learn how to deal with everyday disagreements.

"The core idea...is that kids are able to solve their own problems," she says. "The Conflict Managers' job is...to create a space where the people who are in conflict will talk and create a solution."

Around 28-30 fourth and fifth grade kids serve as Conflict Managers. Students are nominated by their classmates, based on qualities such as the ability to be fair, to listen, and to be supportive. Kids must be willing to give up a recess period to wander the playground, usually in pairs, looking for kids who might be having a conflict. Day emphasizes that Conflict Managers should also look for kids who might look sad, lonely, or isolated and ask them if they would like to talk. Conflict Managers also give out stickers for good

behavior and help explain the rules of basic playground games.

After about eight hours of training, students, armed with clipboards to document interventions, and wearing bright blue T-shirts, patrol the playground to offer help.

"Jan taught us how to say stuff," Helen, age 9, explains. "You need to announce your name. 'Hi, I'm Helen and I'm a Conflict Manager. Do you need help solving this problem? Do you agree that you will not interrupt or do put-downs while we are solving this? What's your side of the story? How do you guys feel?'"

After listening, summarizing, and restating the problem, Conflict Managers ask kids to think of something that would make them feel better. Sometimes it's as simple as telling another student that they are sorry for hurting their feelings.

"[Conflict Managers] go around and try to make people loving and happy all the time," Helen says. "If there is a conflict, they try to solve it and try to make it never happen again."

—Sabrina Speidel