

Students and parents learning together at Connaught Street School

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Parents at Connaught Street Elementary School in Fredericton are back in school for an hour a week to learn about strengthening their families.

Facilitators from the John Howard Society of Fredericton, in partnership with the school, are teaching parents the same social and emotional language and strategies their kids are learning in school to express their feelings.

The eight-week program called, "Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities," is designed to teach and encourage families to become more aware of their emotions and to be able to communicate and respect how each family member is feeling. The school takes the mental health of their students very seriously and parents, impressed with what their children were learning, asked how they could get the same tools to use at home.

Justin Young, program facilitator at The John Howard Society, reached out Principal Barb Corbett to create the partnership.

"The children were already learning these great tools to help them to clearly express their emotions", said Young. "Teaching the parents the same language and tools allows families to better communicate amongst themselves and parents can better understand how their children are feeling."

"Parents see the tremendous benefit of the program," Corbett explained. "We've had nothing but a positive response and parents who took the program last spring are encouraging other parents to participate."

Ten families participated in the program this past spring and 12 more families are enrolled in the current program.

Parents attend a one-hour session each week at Grace Memorial Baptist Church, located across the street from Connaught Street School. The church administration generously donates the space for the program. The session is facilitated by Young, and parents learn about a variety of topics including family

meetings, the 7 Habits of Happy Kids, Size of the Problem, how emotions are connected to the five senses, and zones of regulation — a tool that their children use in school to identify their feelings, understand how their behaviour impacts those around them, and learn what tools they can use to manage their feelings.

At the same time, their children are attending their own session at the school with Katharine Palmer, a Connaught Street School guidance counsellor, and a John Howard staff facilitator.

At the end of their respective sessions, the children join their parents at the church to share a healthy family meal and a brief presentation.

Parents are enthusiastic about the benefits of the program.

The Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities Program to date has been funded through grants from the Fredericton Community Foundation. The John Howard Society is looking for additional, sustainable funding to allow the program not only to continue, but to expand to other schools in Fredericton.

“Principals, teachers and parents at other schools have heard about the program and are asking for us to bring it into their schools as well,” says Young. “We want to be able to provide this important program to them, but we need the funding to do so.”

The John Howard Society of Fredericton is a registered charity that provides a wide variety of community programs, including community adult learning, soft skills development, general support services, outreach services, intensive case management services and affordable housing for the homeless.