

# People weekly

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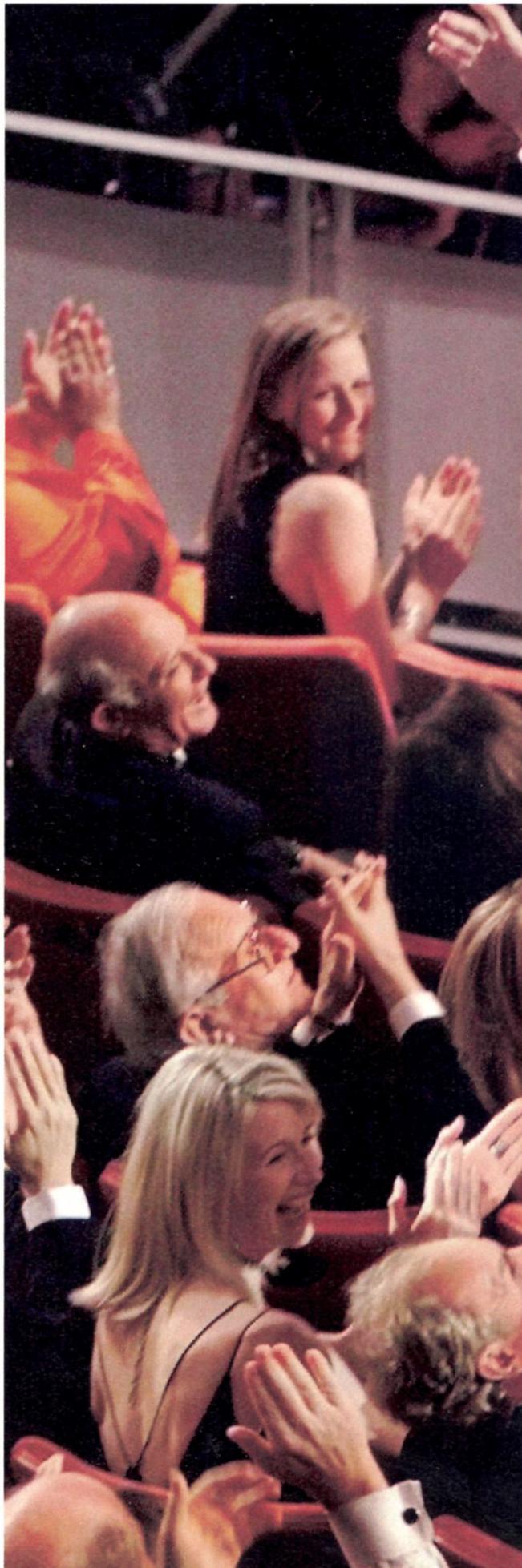
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Cover photographs by (counterclockwise from top left): Blake Sell/Reuters, Stewart Cook/Rex USA, Tom Rodriguez/Globe Photos, Dave Caulkin/AP, Ron Davis/Shooting Star, Michael Caulfield/AP, James Smeal/Galeata Ltd. (2), Steve Granitz/Retna Ltd. (3)



ERIC DRAPER/AP

# Give Peace a Chance

Psychologist Dennis Embry helps to transform schoolyard bullies into angels



His program “doesn’t just teach” troublemakers good behavior, says Embry (outside a Salinas, Calif., school). “It makes it happen.”

The onetime terror of the Henry Kammann Elementary School in Salinas, Calif., smiles angelically as he recounts his formerly wicked ways. “I used to call people stupid,” says Chris, a burly fourth grader. “I used to get into fights. I didn’t like coming to school because I didn’t have any friends and I didn’t like going to the principal’s office.” The 10-year-old eyes the ’60s-style peace symbols that festoon his classroom. “Now, I have friends and I walk away from fights,” Chris declares. Teacher Cheryl Mattison agrees: “It’s amazing—kids actually like to play with him now.”

Credit **Peace Builders**, a program

created seven years ago by Tucson child psychologist Dennis Embry that is helping to transform bullies—those terrifying tormentors of childhood who often go on to commit violent acts as adults—into peaceable classroom citizens. How? By teaching kids at nearly 400 U.S. elementary schools nonaggressive ways to deal with touchy situations and creatively praising those who abandon their troublemaking habits.

One key, explains Embry, 50, is ensuring no good deed goes unrewarded. Kids fill out “peace notes” to commend one another for actions as simple as returning a dropped notebook. On playgrounds, says

Embry, adult “peace coaches give out citations for cooperative behavior.” Says teacher Mattison: “Pointing out what the students do right seems to work better than pointing out what they do wrong.”

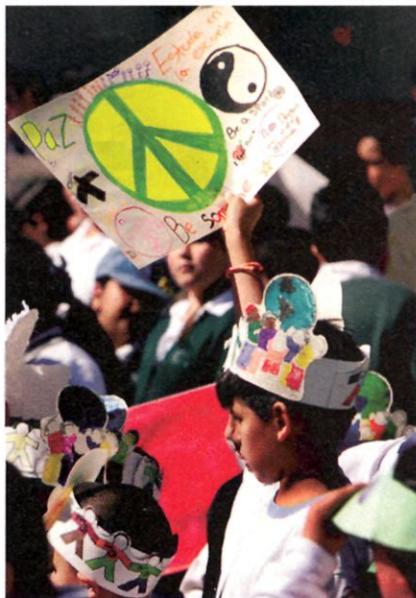
Many experts declare the for-profit program (each school district pays about \$75,000 for initial materials and teacher training) remarkably effective. “Kids in **Peace Builders** schools get along better with other kids,” says child psychologist Daniel Flannery, who directs the Kent State Institute for the Prevention of Violence and is conducting a federal study of the program. Among 5,000 students being tracked, he says, **Peace**

## ● teachers

**Builders** has halved the number of frequent troublemakers in two years. **Peace Builders** “takes really simple concepts and changes the culture of the school,” Flannery says.

No place has embraced **Peace Builders** more wholeheartedly than Salinas, a farming community where activists have taken the program far beyond the classroom doors. On the streets of the economically battered city of 140,000, police officers issue children “peace citations”—redeemable for free videos or snacks at local shops—commending them for such things as refraining from jaywalking. Volunteers train parents in **Peace Builders** techniques and phone them with praise for their children’s good deeds. An annual Peace Week includes a rally and awards show; even the local juvenile-detention center employs **Peace Builders** principles.

Patricia Skelton, whose community group, the Violence Injury Prevention Coalition, spearheaded the citywide program, says juvenile misdemeanors have dropped 50 percent and felonies 29 percent in the program’s three years. (At Salinas’s 21 elementary schools, officials say, fights are down 15 to 25 percent; absences and suspensions, 15 percent.) The program “has changed the lives of hundreds of kids in Salinas,” insists former local TV anchor Dina Ruiz



An eager Salinas fifth grader gets artistic at a 1998 **Peace Builders** march.

RICHARD GREEN/THE CALIFORNIAN

Eastwood (wife of actor Clint), whose station contributed to the cause with weekly on-air promotions. “It’s unbelievable.”

Although many other school districts have signed on—including Los Angeles County, which uses **Peace Builders** in 15 schools—not everyone is sold. Antonio Arredondo Jr., superintendent of an elementary school in Riverside, Calif., says his district abandoned **Peace Builders** (which charges some additional fees each year) as too costly after testing it in his school. And Myron Dembo, a professor of educational psychology

at the University of Southern California, cautions that many factors influence behavioral trends. “A lot of people have spent a lot of money on programs like these to find out they don’t really work,” he says.

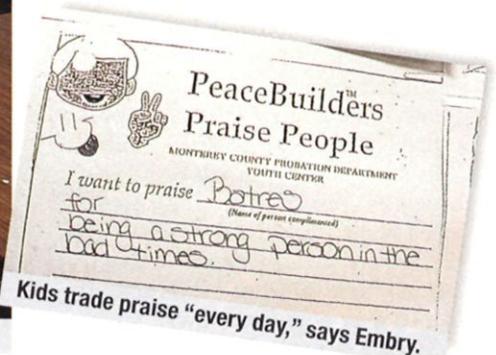
Don’t tell that to the energetic Embry, who pored over thousands of academic studies covering everything from criminology to brain chemistry in designing his program, which also draws on his own three decades of research. Helping kids, the Great Bend, Kans., native says, “has been my life’s work and my passion”—in part because of his own miserable childhood. His late father, a portrait photographer, and mentally ill mother were alcoholics whose violent fights, Embry remembers, sometimes landed them in jail or hospital rehab centers. Kindly neighbors and teachers, Embry says, “taught me that the world was not what I was experiencing at home.”

Embry, whose older brother Crandell, a photographer, died in 1997, majored in history at the University of Kansas, where he met wife Lynn (they divorced in 1991 after 19 years of marriage). He went on to earn a doctorate in psychology in 1981. Part of his thesis research centered on using storybooks in which children could fill in their own names for those of the heroes. “When I would tell a story substituting the child’s name, he or she would light up,” he says, and begin to imitate the stories’ role models. “Children need to be heroes,” he says.

Convinced of the power of positive reinforcement, he started creating storybook-centered programs for groups that included the U.S. military, which in 1991 sent him to Germany to study stress among children of Gulf War veterans. He came up with a reassuring book called *Some-*



At Salinas’s Kammann School, youngsters write compliments on one another’s backs.



Kids trade praise “every day,” says Embry.



PAUL F. GEROSABA

Embry (at home with friends and parrot Pepper) calls his ideas “very ancient wisdom.”

one in My Family Went Off to the Middle East. Soon after returning to Tucson, where he had settled in 1987, he got the idea for **Peace Builders** from his Sunday-school stu-

dents at his Methodist church. “My class said to me, ‘War is bad for kids and you wrote a book about that, and peace is good for kids and there is no book for helping kids make

peace in the world,’” he recalls.

So Embry created additional books and classroom materials. A Tucson elementary school signed on in 1992, soon after the Centers for Disease Control issued Embry a six-year grant to investigate the program’s effectiveness. Today, Embry—who shares a Southwestern-style Tucson house with a roommate and parrot and enjoys in-line skating and rock climbing with his friends’ kids—is working with his six employees to lower **Peace Builders** price by computerizing some materials. He is also developing a program appropriate for older students. Meanwhile, Embry says, “the world should be watching Salinas.”

Indeed, at Kammann Elementary, students, teachers and parents brim with enthusiasm for Embry’s ideas. Every morning, children recite a peace pledge, and Mattison’s bulletin board teems with kid-to-kid peace notes. Ex-bully Chris, says Mattison, “gets some of the nicest.”

- Samantha Miller
- Vicki Sheff-Cahan in Salinas