



School's new program highlighted by PeaceFest

By SARAH ROHRS/Times-Herald staff writer
Vallejo Times Herald

She got into trouble so often last year she can't recall how many times she was sent to the principal's office. But, this year, Patterson Elementary student Darcus Shaw has not been to the office once.

Her mother Gwen Shaw and her fifth-grade teacher David Parker credits the big change in Darcus to the PeaceBuilders anti-violence program the entire school adopted.

"There's less fighting," the girl said Thursday during Patterson's parent open house.

"The best kids try to do things peacefully," she added.

Shaw and her daughter were among only a handful of parents who attended the open house, which Patterson called a PeaceFest to highlight the program.

PeaceBuilders, federally funded through the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act, is centered in the belief children do well with praise rather than criticism. The program involves praise notes, and making daily pledges to resolve disputes peacefully.

The six PeaceBuilder principles are the foundation of the program and are encouraged daily among students, teachers and parents, said Parker, who initiated the program at the school.

They involve the following: Praise people. Give up put-downs. Seek wise people as advisers and friends. Notice hurts. Right wrongs. Help others.

Parker said everyone involved in the school learn a common language that encourages them to make good choices, and to focus on positive things about themselves and others.

The program can also change a school's climate and decrease name-calling, bullying, fighting and other threatening and aggressive behavior, according to the program's website, www.peacebuilders.com.

The brightly colored praise notes pasted on Patterson's walls and on top of students' desks are a big hit. Shaw said her daughter brings many of them home to show her.

Fourth-grader Hector Avila said his favorite part of the program is giving up put-downs.

Another fourth-grader, Gaynell Robertson, said "People will treat you better if you treat them better."

Patterson principal Elissa Shanks Stewart said the number of students sent to the office for fighting or acting out has decreased three- or four-fold since the school initiated PeaceBuilders.

Dealing with anger is key. A flyer Parker handed out called "First Aid For Anger" encourages adults to use a calm demeanor and a low-pitched voice when reacting to an angry child.

The focus on increasing peace rather than escalating violence is not lost on the children.

Denice Morgan said her granddaughter Gaynell has learned methods to deal with her emotions, and seems happier.

When the little girl gets mad she goes into her room to cool off rather than yell or pick a fight, she said.

"It's a wonderful program. She's happy and seems to be at peace," she said.

- E-mail Sarah Rohrs at sroh@thnewsnet.com or call 553-6832.