

Our Lady of Good Counsel Special School – “Changing Culture and Mind-Set”

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Our Lady of Good Counsel Special School is located in Cork, Ireland and caters for pupils with moderate learning disability. It has 68 students on roll from age 4 to 18 and a number of the students present with high risk behaviours which have the potential to cause harm or injury to themselves or others.

A number of years ago the school found itself at an impasse – unable to manage the behaviours of some of the pupils - despite trying our best with various support plans, individual plans, sourcing additional staff and facilities and arranging and re-arranging classes to try to minimise the risks involved. Staff were increasingly using physical interventions in order to keep pupils and staff safe. Several suspensions of pupils took place. This was worrying for management. We tried two other training systems, CPI and Studio 3 but though they helped somewhat they did not succeed in changing the culture and mind-set of the staff in the school. Neither did they assist me, (the principal) to develop appropriate policies and protocols. Then we heard of Team Teach and were delighted when funding became available to bring this new system to our school. We liked it because it was initially developed by *school* personnel for *schools* and so we really found that the trainers understood the context and unique cultures that prevail in school settings. We also found the course was designed with the needs of our particular school in mind and so no time was wasted learning techniques that were irrelevant to our setting. But most of all it was the emphasis on NOT using physical interventions that was most helpful. The course provided the framework for the school to change the way all stakeholders in the school viewed using physical interventions and to try harder to use de-escalation, diffusion and distraction strategies instead. We especially liked the emphasis on using ‘biomechanics’ when RPIs were necessary and the need for a respectful, gentle approach towards the children themselves at all times taking account of their age and ability.

The feedback from staff was so positive we undertook to train two staff as tutors and this in turn helped the school to implement a whole school approach based on respect towards children and staff and on reduction and prevention of the use of RPIs . We now had the confidence to be able to develop our own policies and procedures. Staff now report high levels of confidence when working with pupils that engage in high risk behaviours and as a result we can show evidence of significant reductions in the use of RPIs in the school. In some cases the reduction is 75% and 80%.

Lastly, the back up support and advice that is available from Team Teach is excellent. We have never been let down when we have looked for a little extra help. All of the tutors in Team Teach are very professional and knowledgeable and never fail to inspire us to do better next time!