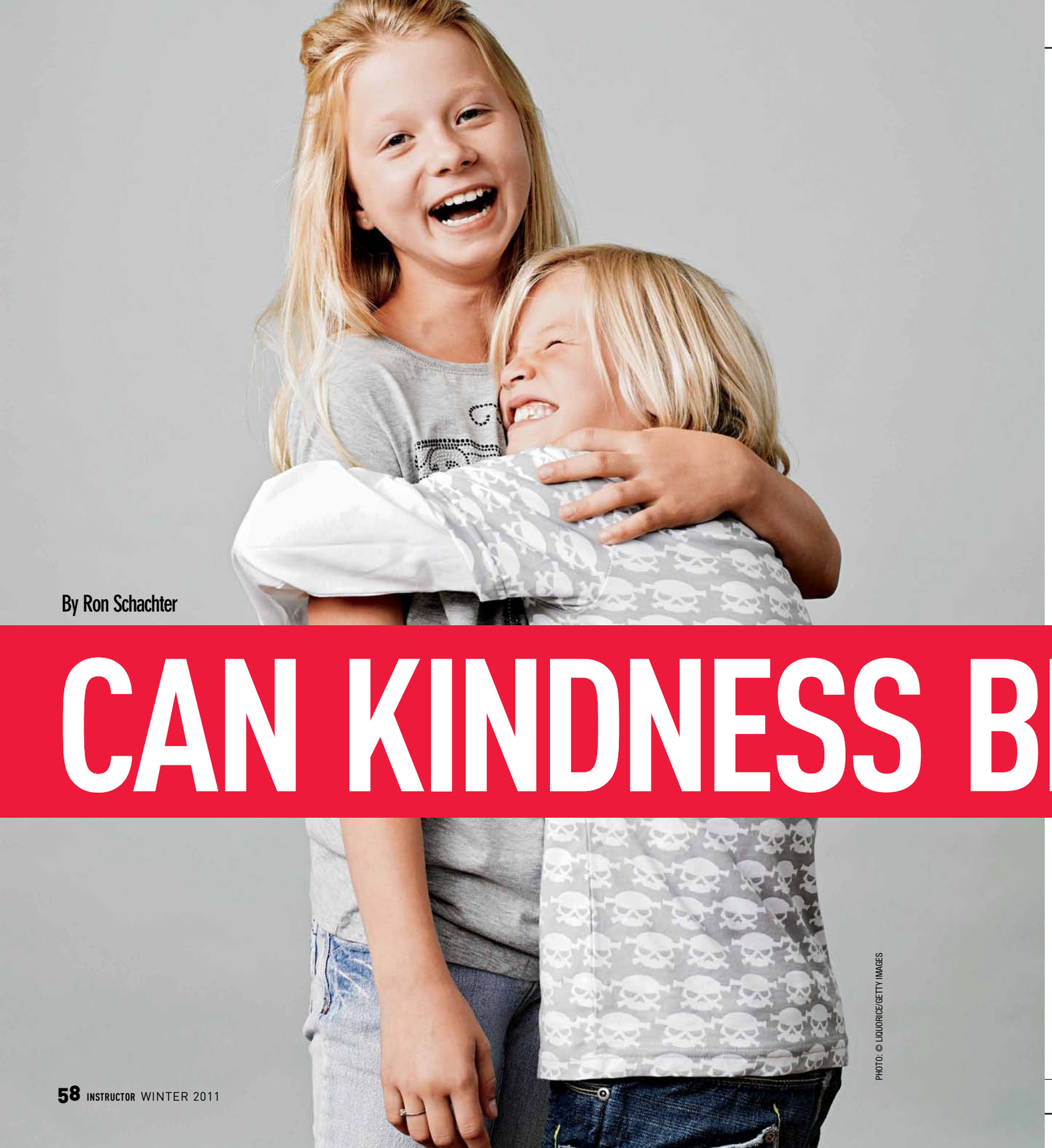

By Ron Schachter

CAN KINDNESS BE TAUGHT?

PHOTO: © LIQUORICE/GETTY IMAGES

Picture a little girl building a snowman during recess. She's working quietly, humming to herself, when two boys chasing after a football collide into the snowman, making it crumble to the ground. One of the boys laughs and walks away. The other gulps, says he's sorry, and offers to help the girl rebuild her masterpiece. We can all agree we'd like our students to be like the second boy. Some come to our classrooms that way, always quick with a gentle word and a helping hand. Others have harder edges, more challenges at home, a million different reasons why kindness doesn't come as easily. What if there was a way to get all children to the place where they'd rebuild the snowman?

As teachers, we already have so much on our plates, and you may be thinking that kindness begins at home. It does. There's no doubt that children's home environments have a huge impact on the kind of people they become. But so do their educational environments. A number of schools are beginning to realize it's worth it to spend the time on "soft" skills such as empathy. Even forgetting the recent scary headlines about bullying, teachers know that a classroom full of kids who relate to and understand one another can make a big difference academically.

That level of trust and empathy takes time, patience, modeling, and practice to build. "We can't assume that kids know how to be empathic," explains Amy Hamilton, a third-grade teacher at Mulready Elementary School in Hudson, Massachusetts. "We have to teach it."

But how do you address such a complex and multidimensional skill, when it seems like every minute of the day is taken up by math, reading, and writing? Here's how Hamilton and other teachers are drawing on outside programs focused on positive interpersonal behaviors, as well as their own resources and creativity.

MORNING CHECK-IN

The school day for Hamilton's third graders begins with a morning circle during which each child greets classmates who sit on a rug. During the 10- to 15-minute gathering, students also share something about themselves or respond to open-ended questions that range from "How are you feeling today?" and "What are you planning to do this weekend" to "What's a way that you help your family?" and "What's it like when your feelings are hurt?"

The routine is based on the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach, developed by the Massachuetts-based Northeast Foundation for Children, which covers cooperation, responsibility, and self-control, along with empathy, and provides techniques

Can Kindness Be Taught?

to help children develop those skills. In addition to the daily meetings, children participate in activities such as "pass-along" stories, where they take turns adding to an ever-changing narrative.

It's time well spent, believes Mary McCarthy, director of community relations and character development for the Hudson Public Schools. "[RC] helps students realize that they are part of a community and that their behavior has an impact on other students," McCarthy says, adding that it also lays the groundwork for the collaborative classroom projects and service learning initiatives that Mulready students undertake throughout the year.

One such project in Hamilton's classroom is serving as a "book buddy" to a younger student in the school. Being a book buddy at Mulready involves more than just reading. In preparation, Hamilton models how the third graders might engage their younger peers. "Then I ask them, 'What did I say? What expression did I have on my face? Who can show a different way you could greet your first-grade book buddy?'"

STARTING EARLY

Service learning in the Hudson schools starts as early as kindergarten, when children visit a local food pantry. "They go in like little detectives, and inevitably they think about the fact that they could bring food items into school to donate," McCarthy says, noting that the nonperishable goods they contribute also provide an opportunity to reinforce sorting and counting skills.

Later in the year, each of the district's 12 kindergarten classes collaboratively creates a baby quilt to donate to a local shelter for single expectant mothers. Besides creating an individual square for the quilt, each kindergartner contributes to a class journal to send along as well. One recent entry read, "Dear baby, I hope this quilt keeps you warm. I hope you have a nice life."

McCarthy adds that parents are noticing the difference that service learning has made. "They say that the projects get the children thinking about other people, noticing those in need, and asking, 'What can we do?'"

A FOCUS ON CARING

A heightened awareness of others and a commitment to service learning also distinguish the classrooms at the Upper Merion Area Middle School in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. The school was recognized last year by the Character Education Partnership in Washington, D.C., as a National School of Character.

Amy Paciotti teaches seventh-grade language arts at the school and also serves as the sponsor for its Community of Caring program, a national initiative that for almost 30 years has targeted skills from empathy to respect. "We brainstorm what the needs of the community are and how we can meet those needs," she explains. "It's all student driven. That's the fantastic part."

"In one recent project," Paciotti continues, "club members located a soup kitchen for the working poor and the homeless run by an 89-year-old woman and her husband. The students said, 'We have a whole school. What can we do?'" They answered their own question by launching a collection campaign, with each classroom focusing on one of the necessities provided by the soup kitchen, including scarves and gloves, toilet paper, and men's wallets.

In her language arts classroom, Paciotti introduces literature that opens student eyes and minds to the experience of others. Among the stories they read is the nonfiction *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, based on the life of a child who as an infant survived the atomic bomb in Hiroshima only to die years later from radiation-induced cancer. As Sadako is being treated, she begins creating an origami collection of 1,000 cranes, which, according to Japanese legend, will make her dreams come true. After she dies having completed only 644, her friends unite to finish the remainder.

Paciotti's students put the lessons of the story into action when one of their classmates underwent a kidney transplant. They made the complete collection of cranes, which they hung around their classroom and outside. "When he came back and saw the cranes, he actually cried," Paciotti recalls. "I told the class, 'Look at the impact you can have on one human life.'"

BABY STEPS

Another empathy-related program begins at birth, in a manner of speaking. Roots of Empathy, a program developed 15 years ago in Canada, brings students in an elementary classroom into contact with an infant who—along with its mother and a trained Roots of Empathy facilitator—visits the classroom monthly throughout the year. Over the past five years, the program has taken root in western Washington state in almost 50 schools.

"Having a baby in the room creates a sense of community," says April Kim, who teaches third grade at Beacon Hill International School in Seattle. "If the baby was crying, the students' behavior and volume became hushed. The facilitator might say, 'I noticed you got quiet,' and then explain, 'You're mirroring the baby's emotions. What do you think is

PHOTO: © LANE OATEY (RF)/GETTY IMAGES

"The projects get the children thinking about other people, noticing those in need, and asking, 'What can we do?'" – *Mary McCarthy, Hudson Public Schools*

Can Kindness Be Taught?

making the baby feel sad?'"

"There's a lot of 'What's the baby showing us right now, and what can we do when we recognize certain emotions in our peers?'" adds Beacon colleague Beth Alexakos. "A lot of students say they better know ways to help others and recognize their emotions."

CURRICULUM TIES

Studying soft skills doesn't mean ignoring the hard ones. Teachers at Upper Merion and the Hudson schools regularly integrate empathy into core subjects, from studying literature to practicing the basics of math and language.

"If you're teaching a social studies lesson," suggests Paciotti, "you can still explore what the particular community you are studying is struggling with and ask, 'How can we make a difference?' Even in science, you can be asking 'What are people made of beyond their genetic DNA?'"

In Hudson, Amy Hamilton blends examples of antonyms and synonyms and a range of math skills into morning meeting. "The children don't realize they're learning," she observes. They're doing it in a cooperative way, and as a result, I think it sinks in more deeply."

That spirit of cooperation, Hamilton adds, carries over into the math partnering and science experiments the students may do later in the day. Even the quilt-making project for Hudson kindergarten classes meets state standards in language arts, social studies, and math.

The Character Education Partnership, which promotes social skills and provides professional development to schools, points to numerous studies that show improved academic achievement in classrooms that stress qualities such as empathy and caring.

STOPPING BULLIES

An additional aim of empathy-related programs is to change school cultures in which bullying occurs. "Bullying is an antisocial behavior. Empathy is a pro-social skill," says educational consultant David Levine, author of *Teaching Empathy: A Blueprint for Caring, Compassion, and Community.*

Hamilton says that the emphasis on communication can make a critical difference. "Bullying doesn't happen when you're building a community and take time to watch and process what's going on," she observes.

How students talk to each other also has an impact. Lourdes Ramirez, who teaches sixth-grade social studies in Hudson, uses morning meetings and other opportunities to address the basics of bullying, raising questions such as "How would you respond if a friend shared she's being picked on? What are the words you can say?" and "What is your responsibility if someone comes to you with gossip? Could you say, 'How do you think that person might feel about us having this discussion?'"

"We need to name options, other choices," Levine stresses. "Instead of saying to a student, 'Don't push her when she's too close,' you can say, 'Be mindful and take a breath, and see if you can move away instead of hitting someone with an elbow.'"

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Educators who have experience teaching empathy note that there are some easy first steps to take. "Literature is a wonderful place to start," says Hudson's Mary McCarthy, who suggests teachers ask open-ended questions that let students reflect on how they identify with what characters are going through.

The Character Education Partnership also has a free site (character.org) with lesson plans built around literature, from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *Camille and the Sunflowers*, as well as an array of other academic subjects.

Barbara Luther, CEP's associate director of professional development, recommends regular class meetings. "We always talk about providing 'voice and choice,'" she says of the meetings. "They help build trust and rapport, and they encourage kids to step outside the box and say what they really think."

Educational consultant David Levine makes regular use of visual perception exercises to teach important lessons, such as the drawing of a young woman which, when viewed from a distance, becomes a picture of an old woman. Levine notes that the exercises reinforce the experience of "looking at the same thing but seeing in different ways. Students need to step back and understand how others are seeing."

And remember, suggests Beth Alexakos, of the Beacon Hill school in Seattle, that the teacher is the modeler-in-chief when it comes to empathic and respectful communication in the classroom. "I try to be really clear that there are times when I say something that comes out the wrong way. I say to my stndents, 'If I ever hurt your feelings, come to me so I can apologize.'" □