

Safeguarding visit - 'Just Joshing'

Firehorse Productions presented 'Just Joshing' to year 2 through to year 6 on Friday 24th February. The group is a member of the anti-bullying alliance and this was their new production which they are presenting in schools to 6 to 11 year old children. Three actors came to St Michael's, wearing orange sweatshirts and with a backdrop of a street scene - Smith Street - with a red telephone box and graffiti on the walls.

The lead man, playing Josh, immediately held the children's attention with jokes, asking their names and high fives. He told them that he was walking a longer route to school to avoid trouble and that he was not happy. He ran away on hearing the other two actors, Jack and Dotty. Jack was the loud, bossy, unpleasant bully who tried to win the children over and who had Dotty following him everywhere as she was 'his friend'.

Josh wanted to be friends but the bullying increased from name calling, to ignoring him, taking his friends and then drawing on his new school photo. It was very encouraging to hear a horrified gasp from the children when Jack began drawing on the photo. Jack told Dotty he was just having a laugh and they formulated the phrase 'just Joshing'. Jack began to steal food and clothing from Josh, to throw his bag and even to take his water and offer it to the children, thankfully all refused. Jack tried to get the children to be friends and admire him by walking round doing high fives - he tried this on Mrs Patel, who just said a clear unscripted no! The children gasped but realised the message she was giving, bullies are best ignored. Josh explained to the children that when someone is a bully other people follow them as they are afraid that if they do not they will be bullied themselves.

The bullying progressed to cyber bullying when Jack persuaded Dotty to befriend Josh and find his new mobile phone number. Jack then began to bombard Josh with unpleasant texts, emails and even setting up a website 'weird Josh' which was seen around the world, explaining to the children how the internet can spread pictures and data so quickly with little or no control. Dotty had been reading about cyber bullying and told Jack to stop. When he refused Dotty went with Josh to tell their class teacher, to which Jack said 'no-one likes a snitch' but Josh retorted 'and they like a bully even less'.

Josh then became the class teacher and told the story of the two apples. He showed the children two identical apples, one he had treated carefully while the other he had thrown around, squeezed and hit, so that when he open one apple it was perfect while the other was very bruised and brown inside. The moral was that both looked identical on the outside but inside one was damaged, just like a child who is being bullied, they often do not show outward signs but inside they are hurting very badly.

The teacher explained to the children that bullying can take many forms, verbal, physical and cyber but all have the purpose of deliberately upsetting another person or persons. Everyone has feelings and has the right to be respected. They ended the play by giving the children the very clear message, 'no-one deserves to be bullied', encouraging them to speak out to stop bullying and to always tell an adult.

The whole afternoon carried a very powerful message which the children all appeared to absorb, sitting very quietly, respectfully answering questions when Josh asked them their opinions and helping Josh by ignoring Jack when he tried his bullying tactics. It was a simple but strong message presented in a clear and very memorable way which I feel sure will stay with the children for many years. Throughout the dialogue the children could witness the progression from the victim being upset by a few unpleasant names to the trauma of the escalating bullying which can result in the victim not wanting to go to school, not sleeping well and not performing to their usual standard in class, as well as the distress caused to the family when they learn what has been happening.

After the production I asked two year six boys for their opinion. They both said that they had enjoyed the production, it had given a thoughtful, clear message which was suitable to the age range and thankfully said they were not aware of any bullying at St Michael's.

Pauline Wiley 24th Feb 2017.