

When hands meet

It surprised the Governor, it delighted the Catholic Schools officer, and it totally shocked the student reps from an exclusive boys' college. The common source of their dismay? A seven year old stepping up and offering his hand in a warm, welcoming, confident handshake. Not one seven year old, mind you, but twenty five Year 2 students from a small, economically-disadvantaged inner-city school. No wonder these 'important visitors' were surprised.

Yet hand-shaking is a daily ritual for this particular class where the teacher, Tracy Ryan, greets every child at the door each morning. 'It's one small part of the **Capturing Kids' Hearts** philosophy,' she explains (a teaching process which Tracy has trained in and offers to other teachers). 'And what an impact it has on our whole classroom experience.'

'A handshake can communicate so much. It signals a safe environment. As their teacher I am there with a smile. I am happy to see them. I'll say "Hey, how did that soccer game go on the weekend?" I connect with each one and work to establish a safe environment right from the moment they first enter the room. Just knowing that they are safe can defuse potential behavioural problems.

'It also gives me valuable information. By shaking their hands I am able to pick up on

points of tension at the start of the day – like the fact that a particular child is upset by events at home – rather than have him explode out of the blue in the middle of class. Because I am more aware, I will tread carefully with certain children, treat them a little more gently.

'The handshaking also helps to change me. Some days I've stood at the door and haven't been in the best of moods. But after greeting 25 children, my attitude has mellowed. I guess it's a case of faking it till you make it. You choose to go out to each one with a smile, and your feelings follow.

'Not least, by teaching them to shake hands I am teaching them an important social skill for life.' Tracy then recounts the story of the Fortune 500 executive who was fed up with interviewing bright young university graduates who lacked basic social skills. 'I want you to hire the next applicant who offers a warm, confident handshake,' he told his staff. Incredibly, it took one whole year to find that applicant, but apparently she got the job!

The humble handshake. It makes great sense for a whole range of situations: family, office, neighbourhood, the sporting field. Parish, too, as shown by those 'welcomers' at church doors on Sundays. Funny how such a small gesture can reveal our human dignity. A thought to ponder next time you extend your hand to a fellow human being. •



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