

## Start with the small stuff

I have been having conversations with school teachers lately. One teacher in particular was enthusing about a new training program, a program designed to help primary teachers draw out the best in their students. When I pressed her for details about the techniques she was learning, they turned out to be surprisingly simple. Greet each child as he/she arrives at school each morning. Stand at the classroom door, smile, shake their hand, offer a word of welcome. Then, before launching into the first lesson, connect with the children first. How was your weekend? Does anyone want to share something that happened to them lately? Likewise, as the end of the day's classes, reflect with them on the day. What is one positive thing that happened? What did we learn, even if it was from a mistake?

Of course, the program contained much more detail than I can describe here. Yet the underlying principle was beautifully simple and clear: Treat each child as a valuable human being. Put people before 'things', even important things like lesson plans and school schedules. Show respect for the whole child, not just their academic ability. Model how to build relationships.

By all reports, the results of such techniques are often astounding. The ability of children to learn, and to enjoy learning, improves dramatically.

Behavioural problems decrease. The classroom becomes a place of joy for teacher and student alike.

A few days after talking with this teacher, I attended a seminar presented by a PhD student on the topic of creating a healthy classroom environment. Couched in the research of educational psychologists, again the recurring message was remarkably 'obvious'. Use strategies that build up a child's self-esteem. When children do things well, feed back to them what they did well, how and why they did well. Correct a specific action; but don't make sweeping negative statements about the child. When taking disciplinary measures take care never to publicly humiliate a student. And so on.

I was reminded too of a young mother who taught me the best way to greet children of infant school age. 'Before you try to engage with them, squat down so that you're at their eye-level. Try to avoid "towering" over them,' she said.

What all these anecdotes bring home to me is how practical is the gospel teaching contained in the beatitudes; how sensible Jesus' concern for 'little ones'. Treating children – indeed, anyone – with dignity and respect is not rocket science. You don't need a degree or a research project to tell you that people thrive in a loving, kind, positive, respectful environment. Haven't we all had an experience where a smile or an encouraging word made all the difference to how

we felt about ourselves? What a difference the 'relational' factor makes to the intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual formation of human beings. How often it is overlooked in favour of an 'intellectualist' or 'performance' factor.

Perhaps the lesson here for anyone who is thinking about improving the atmosphere of their home, parish, school or work environment is to start with the 'small stuff', those caring words and gestures that remind people of their inherent God-given goodness and which make us all more deeply human. •

