

A COMPREHENSIVE AND INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PERSONAL SAFETY AND SELF DEFENCE PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS

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Introduction

The personal safety and assertiveness workshops conducted by Personal Safety Concepts provide the opportunity for young people to explore a range of simple yet practical skills that improve the ability to effectively resist unsafe, threatening or assaultive behaviour, such as harassment, bullying, physical and sexually abusive situations. The sessions are specifically structured to respond to the age level and needs of the children or young people participating in the program. To provide a gender appropriate context the sessions are conducted separately for male and female participants.

Catherine Schnell of Personal Safety Concepts has extensive experience conducting personal safety and self defence programs for schools, government, community and corporate organisations since 1987. Catherine and her staff provide a safe, supportive and enjoyable learning environment for students.

Firstly it is important to ask some pertinent questions to ascertain that we have the same understanding of self defence. How do we see self defence programs represented? The first images to mind are often of striking techniques and other martial art type practices such as locks and throws. The expectations of teachers and students can be of a martial arts based class, hence the classes will be seen as part of the sports curriculum and conducted in spaces such as gymnasiums with perhaps a mixed gender class. The presenter usually has a martial arts background with questionable knowledge about violence issues in the community, especially those concerning young people. Other questions might then be asked about how the program fits into the school curriculum, for example with anti-bullying, safe partying and conflict resolution messages? Does the program reinforce myths about assault and present unreliable complex and 'fantasy' notions of resistance?

In our experience most schools request 'one off' self defence sessions of a couple of periods while others offer more extensive courses for a small group of students or year level. Generally only a small part of the school population participates in the program. Students and teachers often have the impression that the class will be very physical like a kickboxing class. We believe it is important to clearly state that self defence is not about fighting or combative techniques. Classes that are very physical and represent self defence as 'fighting dirty' may alienate and intimidate many students especially in mixed gender environments. While some find such classes fun and empowering the information has very little practical application. It is of particular concern when complex techniques involving locks, holds takedowns and throws are taught, they increase risk of injury to students in the class and are unreliable and unnecessary in a self defence context. Again such approaches do not enhance personal safety strategies or an accurate understanding of violence issues that young people need in order to be informed and able to respond appropriately and effectively.

Students require information about how young people are at risk of assault. These differ for male and female students particularly in secondary school. It is often considered that females are more in need of self defence than the male students because the emphasis is placed on issues relating to sexual assault. Our experience demonstrates that boys are often in need of alternative strategies that emphasise awareness, giving themselves permission not to engage, de-escalation and assertiveness skills and some physical strategies that enhance non-engagement.

This paper utilises the program offered at Methodist Ladies' College as a 'best practice' model for personal safety programs in schools. MLC has a strong commitment to personal safety education for students over a long period of time. Personal Safety Concepts has been providing the program to MLC for the past five years. There is a commitment to providing the necessary resources to maintain the program both financially as well from a curriculum and staff perspective. Staff actively participate and support the delivery of the classes. The emphasis is on a consistent message with school policies and principles and health education programs such as anti bullying, safe partying and campus security.

The Methodist Ladies' College - Middle School (Years 7 to 10) Personal Safety Awareness and Skill Development Program

Structure

As part of the physical education curriculum at MLC two 70min sessions of personal safety is provided for every student each year from year 7 to 10 approximately 1200 students participate in the program each year. This continuity of programming over the years reinforces information from the previous year/s and introduces further skills and awareness appropriate to the age level.

Aims of Program

- Provide students with the progressive development of self-protection and awareness skills from Year 7 to 10.
- That each student receives 2 x 70 minute classes at each year level.

Program Overview

The Methodist Ladies' College Personal Safety Awareness Program is structured to provide students with the progressive development of self-protection skills from Year 7 to 10. The sessions are specifically designed to respond to the varying age levels and needs of students participating. Classes include interactive group discussion on issues such as safety and preventative information, strategies for managing fear, gender issues, success stories and role-play of various situations. The program emphasises simple and responsible strategies, emphasising non-violent and non-combative solutions to conflict and unsafe situations.

Students are given the opportunity to explore a range of simple yet practical skills that improve their ability to effectively resist threatening or assaultive behaviour, such as harassment, bullying and sexually abusive situations. Issues of safety on public transport, in the street, at home and school are discussed for all year levels. Understanding what behaviours can precede an assault in the varying environments listed above and the reality that the offender is most often someone known to a young person.

Importantly, personal safety relies on utilising preventative and awareness measures that reduce the opportunity for a physical attack. While these strategies form a vital part of any self defence response, students are also taught a range of appropriate verbal and physical assertiveness skills, these include:

- The opportunity for discussion of 'what ifs' and other questions and issues which may arise such as managing fear, early warning signs, trusting feelings, the law and self defence, positive success stories in personal safety.
- Students learn to use their voices in a strong assertive manner drawing attention to breathing techniques to control the negative effects of fear, and to assist in using the voice and body in a stronger and more assertive manner.
- The ability to move away and create distance from an aggressor with an awareness of maintaining balance, positive body language and assertive communication through such strategies as 'naming the behaviour' eye contact.
- Introduction and further development for each year level of strategies for breaking free from grips, holds and grabs, how to respond to being pushed or pulled (ie. into a car or room), concepts in dealing more effectively with the weight and strength of an attacker.

- Simple striking techniques using padded bags, the identification of vulnerable targets on an attacker, this section also includes a discussion regarding the appropriate use and need for such techniques. Striking techniques are taught in a responsible manner for when a young person finds herself in a dangerous situation with a larger person. The message that fighting is not self defence is emphasised. This area of practice is progressively developed for each year level with greater emphasis for Years 9 and 10 students.
- There is further emphasis for year levels 9 & 10 students on ‘partying’ safely, relationships and the dangers and increased vulnerability associated with risk taking behaviours.

Essential skill development:

- Safety in the public places, home, social situations (ie. safe partying).
- Awareness, recognising early warning signs
- Interactive discussion of safety issues relevant to young people, success stories.
- Responding effectively to harassment, bullying and intimidating behaviour.
- Application of verbal skills – naming behaviour and positive body language.
- Developing assertiveness skills and confidence
- Self defence and the law, rights and responsibilities.
- Additional physical techniques include how to move, keep balance, break free if grabbed and striking techniques.

Outcomes

A principle outcome of the personal safety sessions is that students feel more positive about what they ‘can do’, gaining more appropriate and empowering verbal and physical skills to respond positively to potentially assaultive situations. The skills gained reduce the possibility of a student either passively accepting or conversely reacting in an overly violent manner to threatening or intimidating behaviour.

Outcomes for program participants include:

- Clear understanding of assault issues for young people.
- To increase student utilisation of preventative and awareness measures that reduces the opportunity for a physical attack.
- Increased confidence and assertiveness skills for responding to unwanted behaviour. Developing self confidence and feelings of empowerment in students.
- Ability to respond effectively to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe through the use of verbal and physical skills.
- Use of a range of safety strategies that reduce confusion and fear.
- Compliments other school services such as security and student counselling.
- Positive change in the attitude and behaviour of students.

Concluding Comments

I thank the AIC for the opportunity to speak at this conference to highlight issues associated with the provision of self defence programs in schools, and to share the collaborative and innovative approach Methodist Ladies' College and Personal Safety Concepts have in providing personal safety advice and skill development to students. Please contact us if you would like to discuss the issues raised or for further information on our programs in schools.

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