

Developing Techniques in a Workshop

Our workshop format was modelled after the one in Nova Scotia. A room was designated as the workshop room and for five days Sue, her mother, the teacher, the principal, the teacher's assistants, the collaborating teacher, next year's collaborating teacher and two school district office consultants assembled and practised together. We began each day by discussing the theory and strategies that are an integral part of Gentle Teaching. Then we planned our agenda for the day, with objectives: how to teach Sue that she was safe with us; that being with us was rewarding; and that interacting with us was more enjoyable than driving us away through physical aggression.

At first, the task seemed overwhelming. We needed to convince the teachers that we had something valuable to offer them in terms of changing Sue's situation at school. For the participants, it was difficult to imagine how people could work together when they had different responsibilities and different expectations of what Sue could do. In addition, they were asked to change the way in which they dealt with Sue. This group was not there strictly by choice; they were required to take part. They were being videotaped and assessed by their peers, a process unfamiliar and intimidating to most of them. The workshop would take a week and some people felt this was excessive and unfair to other students who also required attention. How could we justify spending so much time, energy and money on one student?

From the videotape of the first morning's session, during which time we asked people to interact with Sue as they would normally, we were able to discern some of the typical patterns of interaction. Foremost, those who worked with Sue focused on the successful completion of academic tasks. Verbal exchanges with her included encouragement and giving directions and praise for correct responses. Eye contact was minimal and very much task-oriented. Sue, on the other hand, almost always led the activity, doing what she wanted with a given task or material, or refusing to do a task by turning from