

Caring Hands for the Caring Tree

*Ballentine Elementary School
Irmo, South Carolina*

Ballentine Elementary School strives to show its students that they can make a difference, even though they are very young. Indeed, “Make A Difference” was the theme for this school year. In the spring, teachers and administrators decided the children needed to be reminded to be kinder to others. So they started a simple project, “Caring Hands for the Caring Tree,” that really blossomed.

Through a letter in the weekly Bear Bulletin, the school’s main way of communicating with families, the school invited parents and other care givers to describe acts of kindness that their children performed. They wrote on a form shaped like a handprint, which read: “Caring Hands for the Caring Tree. My child, _____, showed caring when _____.” Signed _____.

The handprints were hung on a “Caring Tree” for all to see. When the children started noticing the handprints, they were eager to add their own examples. The handprints were posted to look like leaves on a tree, and the children could be spotted searching the tree before announcing “I found my handprint!” Teachers made sure their students were contributing to the tree and parents visiting the school checked the tree for their child’s handprint.

The first tree in the guidance office was extended to a second tree in the hall to accommodate all the good deeds. One handprint told of a child who helped his mother bring things in from the car when she was not feeling well. Older children’s examples included helping at home by assisting their siblings and grandparents, cleaning their rooms and setting the table. They did their chores without being asked or opened doors for people, the handprints reported. They improved others’ lives and in turn grew from the experience.

This activity was fun. It also was an easy

project to participate in, even for parents who cannot come to school frequently. It provided parents with the opportunity to share what their children do to help their families. This project met one of the school’s goals of building a sense of community between school and home. Each week, the organizers published what parents had written about their children in the newsletter. The children saw their names and acts of kindness, and could read what their schoolmates do to help others.

Each of the school’s more than 700 students had a handprint hanging on the Caring Tree by the time the project was complete. Organizers said more than 1,400 parents and other adults were also involved, making this a highly successful project. The principal was particularly thrilled to see such wide participation.

“The parents loved it, the teachers loved it and it is interesting to see what things families do together and how we all have many opportunities to help each other in our daily lives,” said one of the organizers. “It helped children to grow academically, behaviorally and emotionally,” she added.

The “Caring Hands” project capped a year of “making a difference” through good deeds and community service. This also included visiting a nearby nursing center, Lowman Home, and bringing the residents there small gifts, including socks, Valentine’s Day cards and forget-me-not plants that the children grew from seeds as part of their classwork.

Ballentine students had many opportunities to make a difference.

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