Children Get a "Kick" From Learning

The Situation
Six years ago the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System in Ada County and the Boise School District set off on a journey to help families. The partnership created childcare sites on school grounds for elementary students. The partnership’s project grew from two to 11 sites.

Grant funds sustained the program for the first five years while Extension managed the program. In July 1996, the program, called “Just for Kicks”, became part of the Boise School District. The program is an important part of the neighborhood school community meeting childcare needs of families.

In the Whitney School, “Just for Kicks” rallied to help “Mary” (not her real name), a student in the program. The site coordinator said Mary seemed withdrawn and exhibited inappropriate behavior. To gain attention and security, Mary acted out and displayed behavior that caused trouble.

Our Response
The “Just for Kicks” site coordinator responded by seeking help from the school’s counselor. Investigation found the problem was that Mary’s mother was receiving treatments for multiple forms of cancer. The mother was deeply in debt and had a major health challenge, creating difficulty in meeting Mary’s needs.

To help reduce out-of-pocket medical expenses for the family, the mother’s doctor offered to pay 95 cents per aluminum pop-top. An aluminum pop-top is the small tab that one pulls to open a beverage can. Children enrolled in the “Just for Kicks” program enthusiastically launched a school-wide collection project to help Mary and her mother.

As news of the collection spread throughout the school, classrooms collecting the most tops received popsicles as a reward from the “Just for Kicks” program. More than 20,000 pop-tops flooded into the school each week. News of the collection spread throughout the school community and Mary began to open up by gaining confidence and enjoying the attention. She even began to talk about her mother’s illness.

Whitney School, serving a low-income neighborhood, had set a goal to raise money to help Mary and her mother. The site coordinator said by choosing a recyclable item such as a pop-top, the program met with additional success.

Achievements
Because children collected 155,000 pop-tops, the doctor considered the mother’s medical bills paid in full. Mary, now a well adjusted second grader at Whitney, still is in “Just for Kicks”. The mother’s health improved, and she is in remission and out of debt for medical bills. Mary’s mother credits the “Just for Kicks” pop-top project with lifting her own morale and improving her health through a positive attitude. She also credits the project with lifting Mary’s self-esteem and attitude.
Before the collection effort, students enrolled in "Just for Kicks" received teasing and ridicule. Now those students enjoy praise and status from their school peers for being part of the program and spearheading the pop-top collection. Peers recognized how the "Just for Kicks" program helped a family, adding prestige to those enrolled in the program.

**The Future**

In the fall of 1997, "Just for Kicks" continued to coordinate monthly pop-top collections and classroom awards. The Ronald McDonald House now receives the monetary benefits of the collection efforts. An important lesson learned with Mary and her mother was that volunteering and lending a hand are important and have positive effects. That lesson continues on a daily basis at Whitney.

**Cooperators and Co-Sponsors**

University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, Ada County and Boise School District.

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