

Teaching Positive Touch

By Maria Hart

On a sunny winter morning in 2004, I came across a newspaper article about the Message in Schools Program. At the time I was involved with a large primary school in a low socio-economic area of Perth. As I read about the aims of the program, I thought that it would be very beneficial to these students.

The Message in Schools Program (MISP) is a unique, peer message program founded in 2000. Its vision is for every child at school to experience positive and nurturing touch every day.

MISP can only be introduced in to the classroom by a trained instructor. As a structured program for children aged four to 12, it is based on an ethos of respect. Each child asks for permission before they begin and says "thank you" to their partner at the end.

Clothed and seated, the children perform the massage with strokes on the back, neck, head, arms and hands for 10 to 15 minutes daily.

Massage is an interactive and interpersonal process that can improve a child's concentration and confidence. Through the power of positive touch, the program is able to reduce levels of stress, aggression and bullying. MISP can save teachers time as children settle more quickly into their lessons after their message. One teacher comments, "I wouldn't start the school day without our message program."

I was part of the first WA training program held in 2005. That year I introduced MISP to several classrooms.

I have found the program to be enthusiastically received by the children and their parents. One dad told his son's teacher how "the message" was helping him connect with his son. One student was able to concentrate on the message strokes in a manner that he hadn't shown for other activities. Massaging



became the means for several children with high functioning autism to interact with peers.

The program has touched the lives of students, parents and schools. The benefits can expand to the whole community if enough schools are prepared to embrace it.

Maria Hart has a MSc. in counselling/psychotherapy and is a qualified Message in Schools Program instructor. She can be contacted on 0414 841 023. Visit www.messageinschools.com.au