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FEATURED

Can you hear me now? Students taught importance of effective communication, listening in a text-first world

By David Hurst

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Northern Cambria middle school teacher Dan Pajak uses verbal and non-verbal skills to demonstrate to his students the importance of effective communication during a Botvin LifeSkills class on Tuesday, Dec. 11, 2018.

By Todd Berkey

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Northern Cambria history teacher Dan Pajak stood in front of a classroom full of seventh-graders and rattled off a brief list of instructions.

Draw a circle.

Add a triangle inside it.

Then add a square in the corner.

The 22 students listening to his assignment sketched out his commands 27 different ways on the small sheets of paper in front of them.

“To get my message across as a teacher, I need to communicate effectively. I have to be direct,” he said, noting that without vital details about where he wanted each shape placed, it was almost impossible to carry out the task.

Pajak was delivering a lesson on effective communication Tuesday as part of a character education class at the school.

In today’s text-first world – with kids increasingly relying on cellphone messaging and other technology to communicate – the crucial, timeless elements to both verbal and nonverbal expression are often lost in translation, the teacher said.

And that could lead to a lifetime of problems, he said.

Pajak was working to change that course, delivering a lesson through Botvin LifeSkills Training, an evidence-based program aimed at guiding youth toward healthy habits that can prevent them from falling into violent or addictive patterns.

United Way of the Laurel Highlands, The Learning Lamp and Alternative Community Resource Program adopted the nationally recognized Botvin program in 2011. Over the years since, Botvin programs have been implemented in classrooms in grades 3 through 8 across the region.

With support from the Cambria and Somerset’s single-county authorities, the Cambria County Drug Coalition and the Twin Lakes Center, the interactive, hands-on training program has since been expanded into every school district in the two-county area, according to United Way Community Relationship Manager Matt Spangler.

Spangler oversees youth prevention programs for the local United Way.

Botvin is taught to students over eight to 10 sessions that delve into a variety of life skills, such as anger management.

The side effects of drugs and alcohol are also discussed.

But other topics, including communication skills, are just as important for guiding young adults down productive paths, Spangler and Pajak said.

“If you have the skills and abilities to manage situations in your life that come into play, it’s going to reduce the chances you’ll fall into destructive patterns,” Spangler said.

Pajak noted that today’s elementary-age learners were born into a world of text messaging and an array of communication technology.

He talked with students about the importance of communicating effectively – sending the same, direct message using words, eye contact and body language, as well as recognizing when to stop and listen to someone else.

“You’re going to have to listen to directions later in life, too,” Pajak told the class.

And the stakes will rise, he added.

Whether someone finds work as a welder, police officer or power-line worker, “if you don’t listen to people when they are trying to tell you something, bad things will happen,” he said. “If you are outside your home and you don’t pay attention to the guy who shows you how to cut down a tree properly ... you could be in real trouble.”

An important conversation with a relative, a boss or a spouse could lead to breakthroughs or breakdowns, depending on how those encounters are handled, Pajak said.

Seventh-grade student Jackson Sheredy said this is his second year taking Botvin “character-building” classes, and it’s a lot different than the rest of his course load, he added.

“We’re talking about a lot of things – anger management or body language – that you don’t even really think about every day,” he said.

Even a task as simple as relaying a message can be handled differently – by senders and receivers – particularly by generations that grew up communicating differently, he added.

“When (Pajak) mentioned how our grandparents communicate with home phones, it reminds you how everything changes over time,” Sheredy said.

Such generational gaps can create barriers, especially during the teen years, Pajak said, but the solution to overcoming the hurdles hasn’t changed.

“There are a lot of kids out there who aren’t making the wisest decisions in the world, and a lot of times, it’s because they weren’t paying attention to something someone was trying to tell them,” Pajak said.

“It’s amazing how much you can learn if you listen and pay attention.”

Whether it’s a problem in school, with a friend or with drugs in the neighborhood, the best response is to communicate, he said.

“Don’t let it go and have it turn into something bigger than it already is,” Pajak said.

“Speak up.”

David Hurst is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at (814) 532-5053. Follow him on Twitter [@TDDavidHurst](#) and Instagram [@TDDavidHurst](#).

More Information

United Way campaign

The United Way of the Laurel Highlands is partway into a \$1.3 million capital campaign to raise money for community programs that address early childhood development issues, parental engagement and youth drug and alcohol efforts – such as the Botvin LifeSkills training program.

- To donate, visit: www.uwlaurel.org and click "Give."

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