

TOUCHSTONES spin-off takes elementary school students and Gives 'em something to talk about

By THERESA WINSLOW Staff Writer

Erik Deaton knows full well the hurt and anger of having something stolen.

His \$40 video game was snatched from his backpack at school last month.

But the 10-year-old fifth-grader at Richard Henry Lee Elementary School in Glen Burnie never accused anyone. He had no proof.

He told classmates the story last week during a discussion that, at times, seemed more like a business meeting than a chat between friends or a typical classroom lesson.

"I feel more grown-up," Erik declared at one point in the Touchpebbles session.

Touchpebbles is the elementary school version of Touchstones, an educational program from an Eastport nonprofit that fosters mature discourse between students.

Founded by St. John's College faculty members, Touchstones Discussion Project takes part of the school's seminar-style learning approach and adapts it to younger students. The idea is to foster greater cooperation and increased listening and communication skills.

Unlike a regular class, the teacher isn't the focal point of a Touchstones session. The students themselves lead the discussion, usually held weekly, which is based on material that requires no prep-work. They sit in a circle and don't have to raise hands to make their points. They also break into small groups to troubleshoot.

The program and organization take their name from a tool, called a touchstone that was used by jewelers to test the quality of gold or silver. In the same way, a Touchstones session is aimed at revealing students' thoughts and abilities.

"There's always a problem," said second-grader Danny Spear, who is in the other class at Richard Henry Lee that uses Touchpebbles. "I like problems. I always know how to solve them because I have two sisters and one brother."

Last week, Erik and his classmates pondered what to do if someone would accuse them of stealing. The talk was centered around the tale of a Chinese woodsman who loses his ax and thinks the boy next door stole it. The woodsman later finds the ax buried under wood he chopped days earlier.

This was the sixth session of Touchpebbles so far this year in Tamara Dingman's class, and she was pleased with the progress her students are making with their discussion skills. Touchstones officials said one of the goals is to get students who don't typically talk in class to open up in the unique format.

"There were more students who talked this time," Ms. Dingman said. "This is a topic that affects more people."

Discussion flowed freely in Erik's classroom as students talked about how it feels to be accused of stealing. They said they'd try to help the person who accused them find whatever they were looking for, or provide a receipt or volunteer to take a lie-detector test. They also brought up how they often accuse their younger brothers or sisters of taking stuff, and seemed to understand how this impacted their siblings.

"I deal with it in a very serious manner," said Jake Shriner, 10, offering his thoughts on what he'd do if he knew someone stole something. "I'd say, 'Give it up or your whole life is going to be nothing but a whole nightmare.'"

Jake's quick response is exactly the kind of reply Touchstones president and co-founder Howard Zeiderman is looking for. One of the aims of the program is to get students to think on their feet.

"We don't want to make schools into mini-St. John's," Mr. Zeiderman said. "But we (know) what a powerful tool the discussion process is. I felt so much of American education encourages passive students. I wanted the students to take the initiative."

Developed in the 1980s, Touchstones is now in many county schools, as well schools across the country. Its discussion format also has been adapted for use at senior centers, businesses, prisons and abroad.

"We've had a lot of fun with it," said Janet Bieman, a sixth-grade teacher at Chesapeake Bay Middle School in Pasadena who implemented Touchstones this year. "The students have learned a great deal. I think it helps them form opinions."

Nancy Abler said her daughter, Emily, 11, has always been a deep thinker, but never shared her opinions with anyone except her family until she started working with Touchstones. Emily is in Ms. Bieman's class.

"This gives her the opportunity to share her deep thoughts with other students as opposed to just her parents," Ms. Abler said.

Emily said she likes the fact that Touchstones sessions concern issues different from what's typically taught in class.

Dan Sullivan, a senior program associate at Touchstones, said the lessons also benefit teachers.

"It offers them new skills, new ways to engage their students," he said. "You hear from students you may otherwise not hear from. It offers something other than right or wrong answers. (We know that) so-called underachievers do think about serious issues."

Tracy Nicholaisen, the second-grade teacher at Richard Henry Lee who uses the program, has noticed a difference in how her students get along since starting Touchstones.

"They're more respectful of one another," she said. "My students love it."

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Published April 03, 2003, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.

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