



The Rock Solid Foundation: WITS Program

Children's safety in our schools is a concern to everyone. Parents, educators, and community members worry about the vastly reported crime statistics suggesting that violent youth crime is out of control. It is especially disturbing to when this violence enters our schools.

Several school-based violence prevention initiatives have been presented to students at all grade levels. One such initiative is Rock Solid, piloted in School District #61 (Greater Victoria Schools) in the school year 1998/99, in partnership with the University of Victoria, Youth & Society Research Unit. A resounding success, it was implemented in an extensive number of classrooms in District #61 in October 1999. The goal is to expand this program to all schools on Vancouver Island, then to all schools in the province, and eventually, take it nationally.

Their WITS program, targeted at K to Grade 3, is designed to give younger children the information they need to make safe and positive choices when faced with situations involving threats, violence, or aggressive behaviour. Rock Solid believes it is important that children are taught, as young as possible, the best way to deal with situations that could grow violent, so their reactions will be automatic when they get a little older. To date, 7,000 students are participating in the WITS program.

- W: Walk away and tell an adult
- I: Ignore and tell an adult
- T: Talk it out and tell an adult
- S: Seek help

New lesson plans are helping teachers incorporate the WITS message into their language arts and fine arts courses. The project also involves the development of videos and comic books featuring "WITSUP the Walrus" and his cohorts—all involved in advising children how to deal with aggression issues.

The WITS project is introduced in the classroom by a uniformed police officer in a 45-minute session.

"WITSUP the Walrus," a stuffed cartoon character, is left with each classroom, to be used for problem resolution and to calm upset children. Initially presented with no clothing, WITSUP receives specially designed attire in increments, as the children progress with the lessons. The police officer is always available as a resource for questions or problem-solving. This project leads into grade 5, when the Rock Solid presentations become applicable.

Often, the schools that most need this program are least able to afford it. The Rock Solid Foundation is firmly committed to making the WITS program available at no cost. ▲

