

# How can I use the Tribes Program to reduce the criticism, specifically the number of “put downs,” in my classroom?

Jill Turner



## Biography

Jill’s lifelong dream of teaching was fulfilled three years ago when, after graduating from D’Youville College in Buffalo, she began teaching at River Heights Public School. For the past three years she has enjoyed teaching Grades 2 and 3. While this is her first action research project, it reflects her conviction that a safe and positive atmosphere in the classroom is essential to effective learning.

## Abstract

*Having taught Grade 2 last year, I was painfully aware of the make-up of my Grade 3 class for the upcoming year. Frustrated by the critical comments occurring in the classroom, particularly the number of put downs, I turned to the Tribes Program for a solution. My goal in implementing this program was twofold. First, I hoped to reduce the number of negative conversations and comments. Second, I hoped to improve the overall atmosphere of the classroom. My Tribes training began in early October and I began to implement the concepts into the classroom almost immediately. While all my students participated in the Tribes activities, for the purpose of this project I paid special attention to three students who distinguished themselves both in the frequency and severity of their criticism directed at other students.*

## Background of students

This has been Andrea’s second year in my class. Her “put-down” behavior became evident early in our first year together. Andrea frequently made negative comments to other students and seldom showed remorse for her behavior. Due to her behavior, her friendship with other students in the class dwindled over her Grade 2 year. Many students refused to play with her at recess, were unwilling to share personal items with her (such as pencils or crayons) and showed disappointment when placed in a group with her. Despite constant contact with her mother over these issues, parental consent was not given for Andrea to work with a Behavioral Counsellor. As a result, I felt the job was up to me.

Aaron was an active boy who simply did not take the time to think before he spoke. As I had also taught Aaron in Grade 2, I was aware of his behavior when he entered my class this year. Aaron’s put-down behavior was continuous and remorseless. He could bring a student to tears with his comments and move on as though nothing had happened. He wrote notes to other students telling them they were ugly, stupid and many other unkind things. He has also spit in peoples faces, bit and pushed other students. When asked to apologize, while he complied, he was clearly insincere. His put-down behavior was directed toward students, teachers and even parent volunteers.

When the year began, I believed that Paul would be my greatest challenge. His put-down behavior occurred daily, if not hourly. Paul told other students they were stupid, ugly and many other

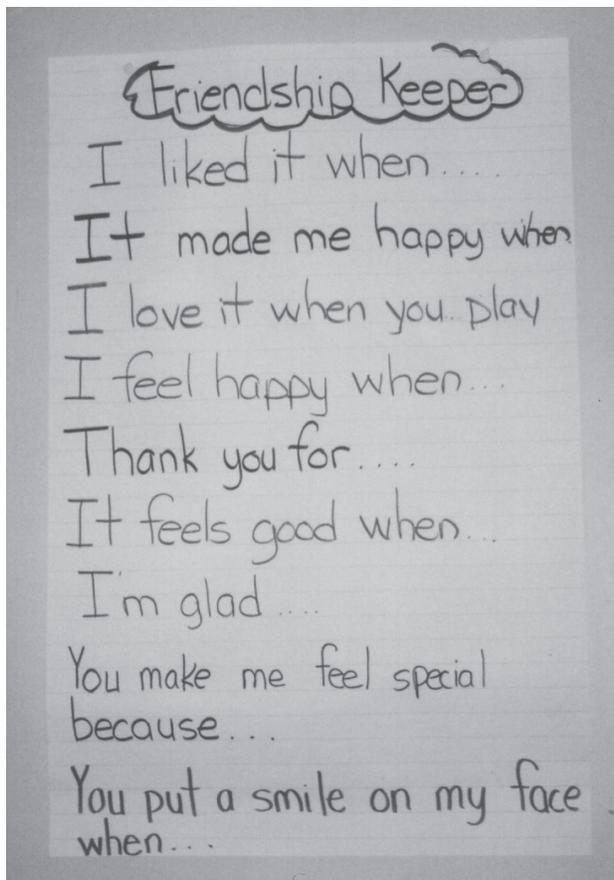
inappropriate words. He seemed to care very little about what he said to others. One day at skating Paul pushed another boy into a bench, seriously injuring him, and then proceeded to laugh and joke about it moments later. Like Aaron, he would apologize when asked, but seldom showed genuine regret. Paul had also taken to writing nasty letters to others in the class (which often included swearing) that were directed either at them or others in the class. When asked about why he said such mean things to others, his response was simply, "I didn't." or "I didn't think it was mean."

## Getting Started

Recognizing that I was going to be working on this action research project, I was determined to use the ideas from the Tribes program that would specifically deal with reducing put-down behavior. As Gibbs explains in the text, "if one of our main objectives is to develop a sense of self-worth and self-esteem in children, school systems and families must find ways to eliminate scores of derogatory and negative remarks that bombard young people each day" (Gibbs, 2001, p. 94). I searched for activities that would leave students feeling "the power of being included and valued by peers" (Gibbs, 2001, p.22); activities that dealt with making positive comments and self-esteem building a more natural occurrence among students.

When I first introduced Tribes to the class, we discussed the Tribe Agreements (Gibbs, 2001, p.21) and the expectation that these agreements were to be followed, especially during community circle time. On several occasions, over the next few weeks, the students met in the community circle and I

reinforced the agreements prior to any discussion taking place. Many students were able to comply with the agreements, while others struggled with one or more of them.



Aaron, Andrea and Paul found the community circle very difficult. All three struggled with attentive listening (they blurted out comments or disrupted the person beside them by poking them or talking to them). When such behavior occurred, they were asked to leave the circle and return when they felt they could follow the agreements.

In our community circle time we discussed such issues as bullying, respect, friendship, appropriate behavior and many other social issues. Jean Gibbs explains the purpose of this time by saying, "time is to give students many opportunities to present themselves in positive ways" (Gibbs, 2001, p.88). My goal was to see students succeed within the structure of the community circle time and then encourage the behavior to continue in other situations in the classroom.

## “Creating a community of learning and being together”

Over the next few months the Tribes philosophy became more and more integrated into our daily routine. In addition to the community circle we began writing friendship keeper cards. While this activity was not directly from the Tribes program, there are several activities listed in the Tribes manual that are very similar (Gibbs, 2001, p. 269, 255, 245, 278). For this Tribes inspired exercise, students would write encouraging notes to each other and place them in the friendship keeper box. The students had to begin their note with one of the designated sentence starters that we had created together as a class (Figure 1). Every Friday the friendship keeper cards were handed out. At first students had difficulty writing the notes but as time went by the students wrote comments with greater ease and were always looking forward to Friday afternoon when I would hand out the cards.



Initially, Aaron, Andrea and Paul seldom received or gave friendship keeper cards. They all showed great disappointment each week when the notes were handed out and they did not receive any. This provided an opportunity to discuss during our community circle time reasons why students receive or do not receive friendship keeper cards. We talked about situations that might lead someone wanting to write a friendship keeper card. Our discussion led to talking about sharing, listening, encouraging and helping our classmates. We discussed how such behavior makes people feel special and included and that we should take the time to say “thank you” for these acts.

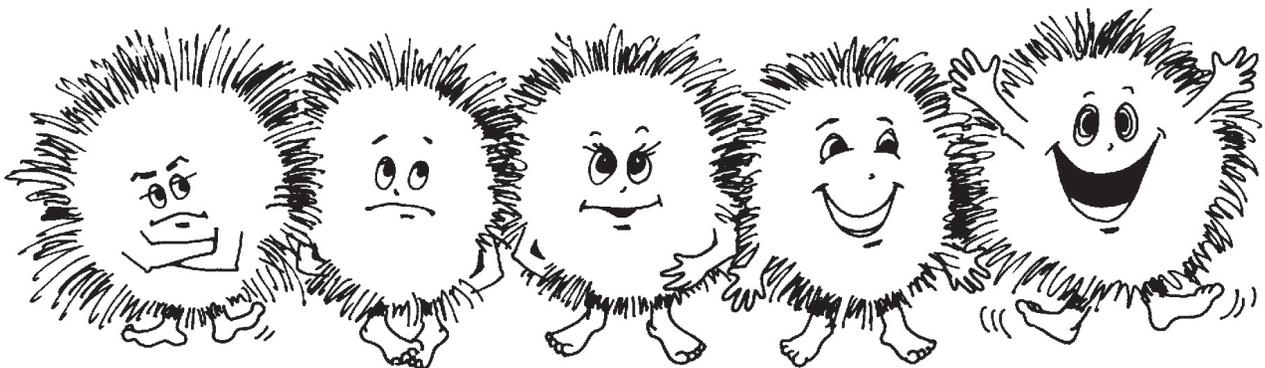
It soon became a challenge for all students to create situations where someone might respond with a friendship keeper card. Students began helping each other more, sharing their belongings and complimenting each other. Aaron, Andrea and Paul were no exception. While their behavior did not change drastically, I was beginning to see all of them make more of an effort to create situations that might produce a friendship keeper card for them.

In fact, within the week all three had received at least one card but still had not, to my knowledge, given any to other students.

Another activity that I used to encourage positive behavior toward each other was “What I like best about my classmate.” Each student was required to write the name of every other student in the class on a piece of paper and beside each name write one thing that they liked or admired about that

person. Like the friendship keeper cards, this came very easily for some and not so easily for others. Aaron and Paul found this exercise extremely difficult. It took both of them almost twice as much time to come up with comments as it did the rest of the class. Andrea's comments were simple and the same comment was repeated for several students in the class. Clearly she put very little thought or effort into this exercise. In the end however, all students completed one comment for each student.

Several months later I shared the results of the pages with the students in the class. They were all given a sheet with the comments their classmates had made about them. It was exciting to see the look on their faces. I even had one student say, rather surprised, "that makes me feel happy." How wonderful it was to see students beginning to appreciate the effect of kind words. Aaron, Paul and Andrea received such comments as, "I like it when you share your pencil with me," "you read well" and "you are good at sports." Unlike the other students, they did not receive the character-related comments such as, "You are nice to me." or "You make a great friend because you care about me." The exercise was completed by a community circle discussing how positive comments make us feel. I think students realized how great it is to not only receive positive comments but also how rewarding it is to give them.



A final Tribes activity that I introduced to my class was the Tribbles. For this activity students were asked to share their feelings by telling the class what "Tribble" most represents the way they are feeling.

Students were encouraged to not only share how they were feeling but why they felt that way. When this exercise was first introduced, we talked about the importance of knowing and understanding how people are feeling. We talked about how great it is to share in others' joys and how it is important to know when someone is sad and why. This allows us to be sensitive to what they are going through and possibly help them. At first, students were very apprehensive about this exercise. Many of them chose to pass when it was their turn to share and those that did share often gave very little information about why they felt the way they did. As we continued this activity students gradually became more open about their feelings and their classmates responded very positively to this. It has been wonderful to see the students begin to rejoice with each other over positive life experiences and offer support when they discover a classmate was dealing with a sad event.

Aaron, Paul and Andrea enjoyed this exercise the most. I think that its simplicity made it easy for them to share how they were feeling and they didn't have to give a lot of detail about why they felt the way they did. Often Aaron would respond with silly comments but Paul and Andrea usually gave thoughtful answers.

## Was it successful?

As I began this journey several months ago, I was optimistic about the potential outcomes. Having attended the Tribes training only a few weeks prior to beginning this project, I was feeling inspired and hopeful that this program would address all the problems I was experiencing with negative comments in the classroom. So, you are probably wondering, did it work? Well I wish that I could say a resounding "YES!" But, it hasn't always gone as smoothly as I had hoped. While throughout the year students were challenged to prohibit put down behavior and encouraged to offer statements of appreciation, some found this extremely difficult.

Initially, I found the process very time consuming. Rather than simply initiating punishment for put-down behavior, I was taking the time to walk students through the situation and how it could have been handled differently. I was taking the time to allow students to share "put-ups" to the students they had put down. I was working to fit in community circle time regularly into our program and taking time out of the already heavy curriculum filled day to incorporate Tribes activities that specifically dealt with this behavior. And . . . after several weeks in ... I was only seeing very limited results, especially from the three students I was observing most closely. I was truly beginning to wonder if it was all worth it!

Thankfully, as the year progressed, I began to see changes; small ones, but changes none-the-less. In November I began a checklist to monitor the put-down behavior of the three students I was closely observing (the graph shows the results of this checklist). While I had been initiating the Tribes program for over a month, I was still seeing significant occurrences of put downs. Aaron was beginning to show more sympathy toward others and was more sincere about his apologies but still showed regular put-down behavior. Paul went from almost hourly put downs to less than ten a week but his behavior was becoming more physically aggressive. Both demonstrated more attentiveness during community circle time and they were both writing and receiving more friendship keeper cards.

Andrea was still a big concern. Her put-down behavior was less frequent but more severe. She continued to show a lack of remorse for her behavior and found it very difficult to apologize. She was sent to the office frequently for her behavior on the school yard and was still receiving very few friendship keeper cards from fellow students. In early February she was sent to the office for inappropriate behavior. Her "problem solving form" (See Appendix A) revealed her anger and frustration. It opened a door for us to discuss what was going on. We included her mother in the discussion and together we came up with some positive ways of dealing with her anger (e.g., walking away, writing down her feelings on paper etc.). Andrea's mother agreed to reinforce this behavior at home and we waited to see what would happen next.

In late February I finally began to see more positive behavior. For Aaron and Paul it was significant and for Andrea it was not quite as dramatic but still an improvement. Andrea continued with her

Dear mom,  
The last couple days I've been  
swearing I put the middle finger up to someo  
and called someOne the word  
staying in the classroom after school  
and playing around with  
Abby instead of going to the bus  
stop I was wandering around the school  
at the wrong time. And I was  
also swearing today please  
forgive me  
From, Olivia.



Dear Mrs. Turner,  
I'm sorry for all the trouble  
and for my behavior.  
And I will try my best to  
get my act together I'm really  
sorry about the last couple  
days  
From Olivia

outlet of writing down her feelings and used this as an opportunity to express apologies when necessary. In early April she went through a period of time when her put-down behavior became more frequent. Without asking, Andrea presented her mom and me with the following letters.

I was encouraged by these letters because, while Andrea was still unable to eliminate her put downs, she was beginning to show signs of remorse when they occurred and taking steps to make the situation more positive.

### Where are we now?

While this journey started out a little bumpy, I can say that it has ended well. The students are participating well in the community circle activities and seldom need reminders to follow the Tribe Agreements. They are more supportive of one another during group work and are writing more numerous and more thoughtful friendship keeper cards.

Aaron's behavior has changed significantly. While I am still dealing with his excessive activity level in the classroom, his put-down behavior is almost nonexistent. His peers are much more receptive to having him in their group and sharing their belongings with him. Aaron, in turn, is much

happier with school and is putting more effort into his studies. This is affirmation that, "the power of being included and valued by peers motivates students to active participation in their own learning" (Gibbs, 2001, p. 22).

Paul, who was my biggest concern at the beginning of the year, has also decreased his put-down behavior. He has found more constructive ways of dealing with his anger such as walking away or talking with an adult. While his put-down behavior does surface on occasion, he is always ready and willing to give three put-ups. His behavior, in general, is more sincere and thoughtful of others feelings. I often hear him complimenting others on their work or encouraging them when giving a presentation or when playing sports. Students are also more willing to have him in their group and will often initiate doing an activity with him.

While Andrea's behavior has improved some over the year, the changes have not been as dramatic. The frequency and severity of her put downs have decreased and she has also, at times, demonstrated

sincere appreciation for others. While these behavioral changes have opened the door for others in her class to begin to restore friendships with her, the transformation for Andrea is far from complete. Both verbal and written name-calling and criticism continue. For example, within the last two weeks she has told one student that their art work was “messy” and another that they should have practiced their shared reading because they didn’t do it very well. I also noticed that while Andrea’s critical behavior has improved in my presence, it quickly returned when a supply teacher was in for the day. Andrea should be proud of her accomplishments so far, but she still needs to make a deliberate effort to control her comments.

### **How has this changed me?**

During the course of the year I started to realize that not only were the students learning about themselves and changing their behavior, I was as well. I am now much calmer in dealing with discipline situations, both in the classroom and on the school yard. Instead of immediately sending students to the office, “posting” them during recess time or sending them to the hallway for a time out, I am beginning to take the time to help students work through their conflicts. I often used such Tribe energizers as “Put Down the Put downs” (Gibbs, p. 368), “I Messages” (Gibbs, p. 371) or “Teaching Paraphrasing/Reflecting Feelings” (Gibbs, p. 377) to assist students in creating more sincere and meaningful conversations to solve conflicts and prevent further problems.

While initially I was concerned that it took more time to deal with behavioral issues, the time was well spent. At the end of the year I spent very little time dealing with the issues because they were either non-existent or the students had found ways to solve the problems themselves. While the Tribes program is not a panacea, often at least partially due to circumstances outside the classroom, it has given me many tools to empower students to search beyond the conflict to find the cause and to find their own solutions to problems. I certainly am celebrating the successes, both big and small, that the Tribes program has brought to my classroom.

### **Bibliography**

Gibbs, Jeanne. (2001) Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor : Center Source Systems.

# PROBLEM SOLVING FORM

Name: Olivia

Date: Feb 2nd

Perspective on Conflict: Conflict happens to everyone on a daily basis. We are all unique - have different views, and ways of seeing how things happen. We can't avoid conflict. Steps are used to resolve conflict in safe and peaceful ways so that no one gets hurt or in trouble.

**Describe What Happened?** I said I dont want to catch your big fat ugly diseze

**Describe Problem:** The girls started to get on my nerves and I said something bad

<b>Feelings:</b> (What I was feeling) I was feeling mad	<b>Thoughts:</b> (What I was thinking) I wanted to punch them
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<b>What I could have done:</b> (Options)	<b>What would have happened:</b> (Consequences)
1. Punch them	We could of got in a fight
2. Kick them	I could of kicked them
3. hurt them	I could of hurt them

**Evaluate:** (From this experience, I have learned the following) I should not fight

W.S.  
Student Signature

S.D.J.S.  
Parent/Guardian Signature