



Effectively Using The Play Is The Way®, Life Raft Family Poster

By Wilson McCaskill

The Play Is The Way® Life Raft concepts are so called because once understood and employed they help children to stay afloat in the often-hazardous and unpredictable waters of life and learning. The five guiding concepts are not always easy to live by and on any given day a child's commitment to abide by this sound moral framework can be tested in numerous ways. However, every time a child stays true to the demands and challenges of any one, some or all of the concepts their character is strengthened, their self-worth increased and their capacity to stand up for what they believe, more assured.

The school your child(ren) are attending is implementing and establishing Play Is The Way® (PITW) as its commitment to addressing the requirements of the *Personal And Social Capabilities* domain of the National Curriculum. The Life Raft concepts are a major element of the PITW methodology and the more effectively they guide the behaviour of your child(ren) the more they will profit and benefit from the full experience of school.



Guided by PITW resources teachers will put effort and creativity into embedding these concepts in their classrooms while pursuing a whole school approach to their understanding and employment. This will significantly help to establish a safe, strong and supportive school culture.

The truism, *the best way to learn something is to teach it* can be of considerable assistance when it comes to helping children deeply understand, embed and practise the Play Is The Way®, Life Raft concepts. It is here that parents, caregivers, the extended family and friends can be of help.

Inviting your child(ren) to teach you about each of the concepts starts a discussion in which you can generously plead ignorance and thereby require educating in the meaning, implications and challenges of the concepts.

These conversations should not be heavy handed, with the motive of revealing fault and inadequacy on the part of the child. Rather, they should carry the energy of curiosity and interest. After all, it is the parent who wants to learn and the child who is



being asked to teach. It is the parent who is pleading ignorance and the child with knowledge to impart. For the child this will be empowering – for the parent it will be revealing because your child cannot teach what they do not know.

Asking questions, admitting your confusion, challenging their assertions and investigating their behaviour within the context of the concepts will encourage your child(ren) to reflect on their classroom learning and daily interactions.

Knowing and doing are two separate things and asking children to share the ways in which their personal behaviour did or did not express their understanding and commitment to the concepts lets them see that character is expressed through words and deeds.

These conversations will help you to give the classroom feedback on the degree to which the concepts are understood and expressed. This will assist the teacher to determine which concepts are the strengths of the class and which may need further exploration and reinforcement. It is also uplifting for teachers to know that children are living by the requirements of the concepts in contexts beyond school, like family, sport and community.

Where the teaching of the Life Raft concepts will be a regular and consistent part of classroom practice, it is best if your investigation and learning of them is irregular and spontaneous. The home is not the classroom, and blending your desire to learn about the concepts into the general conversations and activities of the home removes any sense of your child(ren) being tested. Creating the sense of sharing knowledge and engaging over interesting ideas deepens knowledge and strengthens bonds.

Of course, learning about the Life Raft concepts and then choosing not to live by those concepts tells your child(ren) that you see no value in them or perhaps even worse, that adults don't have to simply because they are adults. Sadly, too many children see the main benefit of adulthood as being able to do what that they want, when they want and how they want with no one able to tell them otherwise. Too few see it as the opportunity to model the behaviour that builds safe, strong, supportive and inclusive families, workplaces and communities.

Hopefully, in educating you about the Life Raft concepts your child(ren) see that in large part your family already lives by these concepts and that you are happy to rise to the challenge of supporting each other to live by them more fully.

Being willing to address one's own behaviour and pursue the improvements that contribute to more socially and emotionally healthy classrooms, schools, families and communities takes courage...as your child(ren) will be learning and experiencing in their classroom. Having parents/caregivers who are doing the same makes the journey more important, meaningful and worthwhile. Having teachers who are consistently modelling socially and emotionally competent behaviour removes any hint of hypocrisy.



Children have always needed models more than they need critics and appropriate behaviour is best learnt through modelling. When adults rise to the responsibility of being the best role models they can be, there is every chance our children will become the personally and socially capable adults our rapidly changing and uncertain world will need. Oh, and you will sleep better when they are old enough to be out at night. Now, that's a comforting thought, isn't it?

IN PLAIN SIGHT

We recommend putting the *Life Raft Family Poster* somewhere where reading it or at the very least, being aware of it is unavoidable. The smallest room in the house usually fits the bill or the fridge door or a wall in a room in which the family frequently gathers. This way it can be referred to spontaneously or when the opportunity arises.

HELP ME UNDERSTAND

Directly asking your child(ren) to share their knowledge of a concept is the most obvious way for you to connect with your child(ren) over its meaning and the guidance it offers.

Example: *"Jenny, would you tell me in your own words what, "Treat others, as you want to be treated." means to you and why we should all do that, please?"*

Turn her answer into a discussion by paraphrasing what she says (see Paraphrasing, below) and asking her to confirm if you have understood her correctly and then probing further. It can help Jenny if you create imaginary situations and ask for her thoughts on how to best respond. It can also help to play devil's advocate and propose an alternative response.

Example: *But what's wrong with calling someone a name if they called you one first? After all they started it!*

Relating the concept back to your own general behaviour shows you are strong enough to be self-critical and that even adults need to be assessing the appropriateness of their own behaviour.

Example: *Can I tell you about a moment I had with Bob at work last week where things might have gone better if I had been strong enough to stick to that Life Raft concept?*

Or: *You know, I was at the supermarket the other day and this person on the checkout was really rude and I was really proud of the way I handled it (followed by a description of what happened).*



Asking Jenny if she has seen specific instances of the concept effectively guiding student behaviour either in the classroom or schoolyard will entice her to reflect on the concept and reinforce its importance.

Asking her to share a situation where she employed the concept and detailing how doing so helped, again helps her to reflect and reinforce. Asking her to imagine how different the situation might have been had she not employed the concept, gives the concept more weight and meaning.

Being honest about home life and the degree to which the concept influences and contributes to family dynamics helps Jenny to see that the concept is universally applicable.

Example: *Do you remember when Nana came around to visit last week? Do you remember how you and your brothers were treating each other? What advice do you reckon she wanted to give the three of you?*

Or: *We're going to have a family talk tonight about shifting to another town so that I can get better work. Before then I think we all have to get this concept into our heads because if we don't, would you like to tell me what is likely to happen?*

All parents and caregivers have their own way of talking to their children and the examples above are not telling you what to say or how to say it. They are simply indications of possible Life Raft conversations.

PARAPHRASING

By paraphrasing you are re-telling the story in your own words. This helps your child(ren) to hear the facts and details of their story and clarify or add as they think necessary. Additionally, it encourages you and them to listen closely to ensure you have all the information they believe is important. It also proves you were listening with the desire to fully understand them. It gives them the security and comfort of knowing that you are hearing what they are saying. Effective paraphrasing strips away the clutter of excessive words and/or unnecessary details. Paraphrasing is particularly helpful when discussing complex issues or situations. It is a valuable technique for parents and educators wanting to connect and communicate meaningfully with children.

SPOT THE CONCEPT

If you are actively engaged in reading with and to your child(ren) this activity helps to develop the skill of seeing the world through a Life Raft filter and in so doing increases the motivation to live by those concepts.



Simply ask your child(ren) at various points in a story what concept is being employed or having an influence on the behaviour of the characters. You can also ask which concept is in absence and would help if it were being employed. If the story is short enough, you can ask your child(ren) to retrace the story in their minds and name the concepts employed as the characters journeyed through the story.

Many stories have an overarching concept and many characters reveal a particular concept as their strength and character-defining trait. Many are composites of two or more concepts and many plot lines have multiple concepts in play or absence in any one moment. Exploring Life Raft concepts within stories in books, films, cartoons, articles, and media, including social media, can be informative, enjoyable and enlightening.

CONCEPT SNAP

This is a family or small group activity that you can play for a few minutes at a time. The idea is to describe a real-life situation in which you either employed the concept yourself or saw it in action.

Select a person to start. This person calls out the colour of a poster that represents that concept. Everyone else immediately tries to think of a situation they have either been in or witnessed that demonstrates that concept in action. As soon as they remember, they shout SNAP.

The first two to shout SNAP win the opportunity to share their story and both collect 5 points. Another person calls out the colour of a poster to continue the process. The same colour can be called again but no story can be used more than once. The person calling the colour cannot contribute a story. After a sufficient number of rounds, check scores and ask the winner to select their favorite story, which can't be one of their own.

It can make it more challenging to use categories from which the stories/examples are found. i.e. films, TV, news, books, real life, animal stories, sporting stories, sci fi, parables, fairy tales, the past 72 hours, etc.

It is also more challenging to find and share a story that illustrates the value and importance of a concept from its absence within the story.

LIFE RAFT TALLY

The purpose of this activity is to help everyone be aware of his or her own behaviour for a given period of time. This can be for a few days, a week, the length of a holiday or a weekend. It also helps to highlight collective strengths and weaknesses as well as the concepts most commonly required in the daily experiences of the family or group.

Create five columns on a sheet of paper and label each with concept colour. At a given time, say just before the evening meal or just prior to bedtime each person



places a tick in the column of any concept they consciously employed during that day. Only one tick is placed in the relevant column irrespective of the number of times a person consciously employed the concept in the day.

As the lists grow and the days pass, casual discussions about the emerging picture and reasons for it are invariably interesting.

Keeping this sheet for a comparison with another sheet in a few weeks or months will also prove interesting.

THE SELF-MASTERY CHECKLIST

These six questions help children to consider their behaviour and make rational and appropriate decisions. Teachers will be the first to use these questions as a way to encourage children to identify what motivates their words and actions. When used well the questions will simply be an addition to the everyday interactions between students and teachers and be asked when children behave both appropriately and inappropriately. The aim, on the part of teachers, is to help children understand the purpose of each question so that children independently use them to master their own behaviour.

The questions are linked to each other and can be asked in any order. One, some or all the questions can be asked in any particular situation to help a child work out how to take charge of their behavior or maintain it if it is appropriate to do so.

Explaining the link....

If you are doing the wrong thing and you know it's the wrong thing then you're having a weak moment because your feelings are guiding your behaviour and not your thinking.

It's important that you deal with the problem and not run away from it. Dealing with it will make you your own boss and running away will invite your teacher to step in, take control and become the boss.

By asking you questions that encourage you to think about your behaviour, your teacher is trying to help you not hurt you. They are in fact, asking you to take charge of the situation yourself by thinking your way through it and becoming the master not the victim of your feelings.

As soon as you are the master and not the victim you will find the strength to do the right thing because you know it is the best thing to do.

You will see that the self-mastery questions have a direct and strong link to the Life Raft concepts.

Parents/caregivers can of course use these questions as well to guide the behaviour of their child(ren). However, more important than using them is asking your child(ren),



in moments of difficulty, to consider which question or questions they need to ask themselves if they want to bring things back into their control. And when things are going well, what, in reference to the questions, is really working for them.

Reflecting on one's success and failures within the framework of the self-mastery checklist helps to embed their influence and makes their use more reflexive.

It is also powerful when parents/caregivers reveal the influence the questions had on their own adult interactions in the home or workplace. The more children can see the universal applicability of the questions the more likely they are to value and use them. Your successful use of them builds confidence in their power and admitting your failure to use them promotes the realisation that mastering your own behaviour is a lifelong journey.

NOTE:

Of course discussion and investigation of the Life Raft concepts changes with age and experience and it can be very informative for parents to see how the perceptions of their children about the challenges and value of the concepts changes with time. Discussing a particular concept at a time of need may be a powerful way to support a child going through self-doubt, confusion or crisis about who they are and their role in the classroom, family, friendship group or community.

At times, knowing you believe in the morally sound behavioural expectations implicit in each concept may be just the safety device your child(ren) need should they find themselves on the often troubled waters of growing up.