

Putting children in touch with massage

North Shore pupils are learning to massage each other in a bid to stave off depression and youth suicide, write Aine de Paor.

A group of North Shore primaries has introduced a controversial massage programme which organisers hope will soon be rolled out to schools across the country.

The Children's Massaging Children initiative begins this Friday at Glenfield and Manukau primaries, while Northcote intermediate is considering it. For the past two years it has been implemented at Marlborough Primary and principal Chris Wargent says it has had a very positive effect on pupils.

The project follows international research which found that New Zealand was a "low touch culture".

According to the University of Miami's Touch Research Institute, low rates of physical contact contribute to high levels of child abuse, depression, and suicide.

But Diane O'Sullivan of the Parent Teachers Association says schools need to be wary about how they introduce the programme, saying it must be properly explained to parents who may naturally have reservations about their child participating. "If they do, then that child should be exempted" says Ms. O'Sullivan. She also expressed concern about how sexually advanced children might be prevented from inappropriately touching their peers while giving a massage. But Ms Wargent says the issue has never arisen at her school. If anything, massage has encouraged children to view one another in an affectionate, but respectful way.

The program was devised by Auckland based Polish massage therapist Eva Scherer, who came up with a simple way to teach children basic techniques. They learn three songs and each corresponds to a hand, head or back massage.

At Marlborough Primary it is up to each teacher to implement the programme as they see fit, but some make time to do it every day. Ms Wargent says it falls under "Hauora" on the curriculum, which mandates schools to do all they can to optimise wellbeing. "It is a lovely relaxing programme that leaves children with a nice warm fuzzy feeling" she explains. "New Zealand isn't a touch culture, which must go back to our Calvinistic heritage but this is a great way for children to learn that touching each other can be non threatening and safe." Playground aggression has decreased as a result because Ms Wargent says, it is almost impossible to hit somebody you have just massaged.

And it is not just children who are reaping the benefits, teachers have also taken to it and will often offer one another a massage in the staff room.

The program will be evaluated by Auckland University's Centre for Child and Family Policy Research. Its findings will largely determine whether the programme reaches a wider audience.

Auckland June 17 2004