

"Reading, Talking and Thinking About Mental Well-Being"

"Well Aware in the classroom: Striking a Balance"

Linda Millar, Teacher's Resource Author, Well Aware Series: Today, we have the unique experience of talking to some elite athletes in a high performance Grade 5/6 class. These students compete in athletics at the provincial, national, or international level and they have a condensed school day as they spend 20 or more hours per week in training. We thought it would be interesting to get feedback from this group on a text by Teddy Katz and Kevin Sylvester entitled "Striking a Balance." This text focuses on the challenge of finding the right balance between wanting to be the best, learning how to self-regulate when faced with adversity, and managing life with friends, school, and all of the other things that kids this age need to juggle.

Image of text "Striking a Balance": For the final classroom snapshot, we've selected "Striking a Balance" by Kevin Sylvester and Teddy Katz. This text consists of a series of profiles of Canadian athletes and focuses on the challenges they experience as they strive to strike a balance between achieving success in their sport and learning how to juggle all of the other elements that impact their lives on a daily basis.

Linda Millar and students in classroom.

Student: Tests, competitions, parents, injuries, new countries, new friends, when someone is better than you.

Linda: Everybody feels stress. And stress isn't always a bad thing. Sometimes it's a good thing. When do you think stress might be a good thing?

Student: When you're stressing about competitions but it leads to a good thing because you're worrying about your competition. Like, if you don't, if you're not stressed, you wouldn't worry about getting your gym suit or forgetting your grips or something, but if you were stressed, you'd be like, "Oh no, did I bring my gym bag or did I bring my grips?"

Linda: Okay.

Student: You wouldn't forget it at competitions.

Linda: Okay, good, well it helps you remember things then sometimes, too, doesn't it? When else might stress be a good thing? Anybody?

Student: When it pushes you to work harder.

Linda: Good, great, anything else? Yes.

Student: When someone is better than you, it motivates you to work harder and reach them.

Linda: Excellent, very, very good answers. When does stress become a bad thing?

Student: For example, in school if you're not getting the best grades or you're having a hard time with your friends then that can be not so good, too.

Linda: Okay, thank you. And it's true that when stress takes over, you know, do you ever feel overwhelmed like, "I just can't do this anymore. I'm just feeling totally stressed." How many of you have ever felt like that? Right. I think we all have and I think it's important for us then to learn how to de-stress or how to be able to cope in these situations and how to be able to bounce back when things don't go our way. What kinds of things do you do that help you when you feel stressed? What are some of the techniques that you use? Yes.

Student: Taking deep breaths.

Linda: Good, like we did this morning, a deep breath, right. What else?

Student: Keep thinking day by day and, like, it might get better each day.

Linda: Ah, okay, good for you. Yes?

Student: Stretching.

Linda: Stretching. Good. Getting your body active

Student: Counting to ten.

Linda: Counting to ten, good, any other ideas?

Student: Taking a minute or two to cool off.

Linda: Very good. So yesterday I asked each of you, each group, to take a look at the text that we have for the Well Aware series called, "Striking a Balance." And in this one, we have some profiles of some really interesting and important Canadian athletes who have had their own challenges and stresses as they made their way to success.

Student: What message does Josh share with us? There are always going to be obstacles in your life and you just need to ignore them because they're always going to be there.

Student: Why do you feel this is an important message? When you have a problem, you just need to remember you are not alone and you are going to overcome them just like everybody else.

Student: Success can come to people from all walks of life. Why do you feel this is an important message? Because it teaches us about never giving up.

Student: What message does Gilmore Junio want to share with us? Sport is a part of life and life is about being a good person.

Student: Why do you feel this is an important message? Not everything is about winning; it's about being a better person.

Linda: The title of this particular text is called "Striking a Balance." Why do you think that title was selected? What do you think?

Student: Because the athletes were trying to balance on their family and their sport because they don't want to let their family down but they don't want their sport to go down either so they're trying to balance their sport and help each other and stuff.

Jan Hassard Teacher, W.I. Dick Middle School: What I find with these students and today when we had our class, I was genuinely concerned that they wouldn't participate because they are reluctant to participate because they are always striving for excellence so they're afraid to give answers. At the beginning of the year, very few of them were participating. Today, they must have felt very comfortable because they were participating wonderfully, especially certain keynote speakers we have in the class that say quite a lot, but also some of the quiet ones, which was very nice to see.

Linda: I'm sure that the comments and discussions we heard today were not only fascinating but also enlightening for us as teachers. Although today's demonstration was with elite athletes, you can see that it's relevant for all students. Finding a healthy balance is a challenge for us as adults. Add to that the hormonal changes of adolescence, the relationships, the pressures, the passions, and just being a kid today. And it's no wonder that they feel stressed on a regular basis. And that's why it's important to keep doing what we're doing: listening to them, caring about them, providing them with social-emotional skills that they'll need to be happy in mind, in body, in heart, and in spirit. Thanks for joining us.

Text on screen: Well Aware can be used in many different ways. The teacher in this video chose to use one title for all students, who worked in small groups. You may wish to use different approaches based on the needs of your class.

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