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Dylan Gardner (from left), Sydney Poole, Alexia Connelly and Michael Lupino, students at Washington Oak Elementary School in Coventry, demonstrate the R.A.D. Kids stance that they learned last year and recently reviewed with Police Officer Steve Lombardi.

Cop works to keep kids thinking safe

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COVENTRY — For every question that Police Officer Steve Lombardi asked, students at Washington Oak Elementary School had an answer. “If you’re a R.A.D. Kid, who do you consider a stranger?” the Warwick officer asked on Tuesday afternoon.

“Anyone you don’t know well,” several students responded immediately. Seeing someone every day in your neighborhood but never talking to them does not count as knowing them well, Lombardi emphasized.

There are good strangers and bad strangers, Lombardi elaborated. The bad ones will try to play tricks on you —”

“Like asking you to help him find his dog,” one girl

interrupted eagerly.

A good stranger, Lombardi said, wouldn’t approach a kid he doesn’t know and he wouldn’t ask a kid for directions or for help.

R. A. D. stands for Resisting Aggression Defensively, said Washington Oak Teacher Diane Hunter. Since the fall, third grade students at this school have been working cooperatively with the Coventry Police Department to give kids a comprehensive safety program.

Although Lombardi is a police officer in Warwick, both he and Coventry School Resource Officer Jay Burlingame have been working together to bring R.A.D. Kids into the Coventry School district.

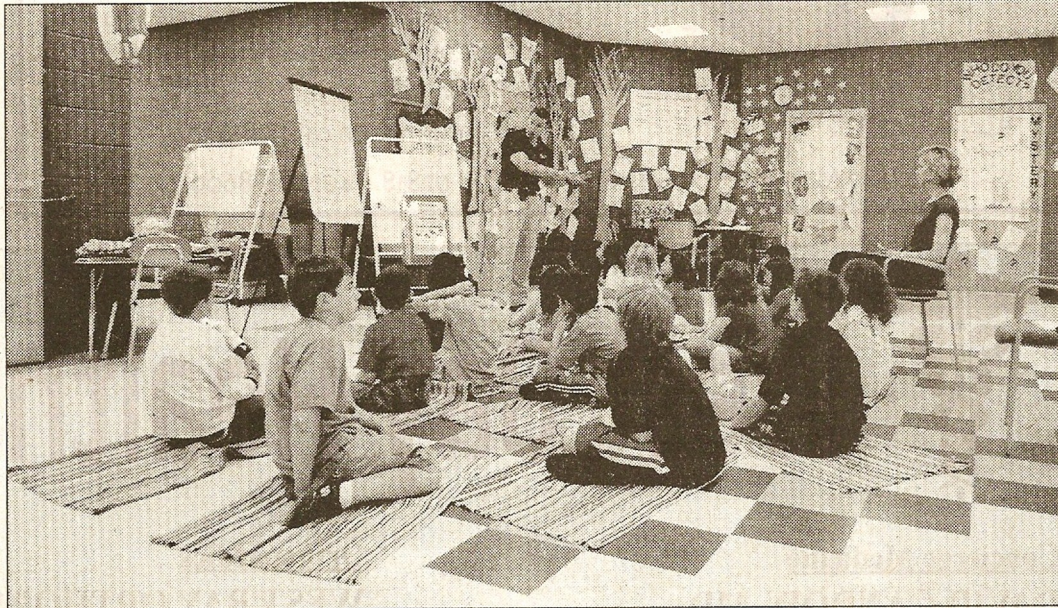
The program teaches students how to contact police and fire personnel in an emergency, how to avoid

suspicious adults, self-defense, Internet safety, and strategies to discourage bullying, Hunter said.

In a lot of cases, it takes kids out of potentially harmful situations by reminding them that they’re not adults, Hunter said. “It’s not their job to give adults directions, to answer the door, or to help adults. Adults need to help other adults.”

R.A.D. Kids started out as a women’s program, Hunter said. “It was designed by a retired police officer who also used to be an educator. The idea of the program was to help students learn about safety, good touch, bad touch, and things that a lot of teachers don’t cover because they don’t feel comfortable doing so.”

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Students at Washington Oak Elementary in Coventry listen to Warwick Police Officer Steve Lombardi as he reviews with them various ways to protect themselves against strangers and other aggressive adults.

Cov. kids brush up on safety

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Lombardi came to Washington Oak three times in the fall school year and also helped the third-grade students put together a special demonstration night for their parents in December. He came back in May to give the kids a review session before they had their summer break.

But most of the kids had pretty strong memories of his fall sessions.

"I think it's because he works with them in small groups," Hunter said. Each elementary school class had three one-hour sessions with the officers in the fall. On Tuesday, they each had a one-hour review session. "A lot of time safety assemblies are the whole school at one time. I think giving the kids their own time really helps. And just that [both men] are police officers makes a huge impact."

The program covered things she didn't even think of, Hunter added. "It's good that the teachers

stay in with the kids, because then they can reinforce what the officers teach them."

"It's a good program," third-grade student Sabrina Peltier said confidently. "You learn a lot of things that adults don't usually tell you. The best thing that I learned was the R.A.D. kids stance."

The stance, Peltier demonstrated, is a way of shielding oneself from a stranger who may be pressuring you. The victim puts one hand forward and the other back, both at eye level, and yells "stop, get back!"

Pepperling was the most useful thing that he learned in self-defense, third grader Ethan Carr said. Pepperling is a defensive motion of the hands designed for a small person to get someone who is larger than them to back off.

Most of the students found the R.A.D. Kids training fun and informative, according to Noelle Gabin. "[Officer Lombardi] is fun and he teaches you a lot of stuff."

After seeing how well her stu-

dents remember what they have learned over the year, Hunter hopes that this program can be extended throughout all grades at the elementary level and to other schools than just Washington Oak.

"Right now it's not funded through our curriculum," she said. "Each student had to pay for themselves. I hope in the future it can be part of our budget and everyone can get a chance to participate."

Hosting a program like this cooperates with initiatives within the school district and also within town through the police department, Hunter said. Police Chief Ronald DaSilva is "very big on community policing and more involvement of officers in schools," Hunter said.

This program accomplishes what the school department is looking for in anti-bullying and student safety initiatives and what the police department is trying to accomplish for the safety of Coventry students, she said.