

Newmarket educators helping kids struggling with social skills



[Joseph Quigley](#)

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Darcie Orr and Jennifer Carter are launching a new local program to help kids with their social development. | Joseph Quigley/NewmarketToday

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Newmarket educators Darcie Orr and Jennifer Carter have experienced firsthand the toll the pandemic has taken upon children at school.

The community class teacher and support worker from Rogers Public School, respectively, said they have seen some students struggle socially after many months of having to learn remotely.

With Orr describing the difficulties of taking action during a school day in a big classroom, it prompted them to do something to help children with social challenges.

"We've really seen the skill deficit for communication skills, for social skills, for skills resolving conflicts," Carter said. "We really just saw a need in our own students."

The two are starting a new program called Social Superstars, renting space in Rogers Public School in Newmarket. The eight-week evening courses for ages four to seven and eight to 13 will aim to teach students about communication, social skills and developing and maintaining friendships.

But the lessons can go beyond that.

"We're not just looking at only improving social skills, but we're looking at building confidence and improving a lot of different areas for kids," Orr said.

Orr, who teaches in an autism classroom, said the challenge for students tends to be most felt in unstructured time, with difficulties solving simple situations with peers. Finding time to help learn and improve in those social situations can be difficult.

"We don't have a ton of staff," Orr said. "The support just isn't there, making it really difficult for kids to get those opportunities within the school day."

Carter and Orr said the program came about due to conversations between them, both wanting to take action on seeing the same trends in social behaviour.

"This will be a safe space for them to be able to practise those social interactions and have people that are qualified to coach and model and do role play," Carter said. "Now, we're finding they all are back in school after learning online, they have no idea how to solve issues with their peers."

The class sizes will be eight students with two teachers running for 45 minutes a night, which Carter said stands to help students who may struggle with larger sizes.

The two said helping students, particularly struggling ones, is work they are passionate about.

"You find that sometimes the kids that have the greatest amount of challenges are the ones that everyone shies away from, whereas Darcie and I, we gravitate toward those kids," she said. "That's very much a mission for both of us."

The two are only running the two classes in the fall, with plans to have new sessions in the spring and summer. They said they have already had plenty of interest after only a few days of marketing on social media, even from parents in communities far out asking when such a program might come their way.

"It is a need in multiple areas," Orr said.

The program costs \$350 for eight weeks and is open to all kids, with information and registration available through socialsuperstars.ca.

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***About the Author:* Joseph Quigley**

Joseph is the municipal reporter for NewmarketToday.

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