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### NO MORE MISBEHAVING

PRESCHOOL PROGRAM HELPS PARENTS, KIDS

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS TO BE TAUGHT IN **MORE** SCHOOLS  
SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS, *The Wichita Eagle*

Your child jumps on furniture. Or perhaps he grabs toys from other kids. He wants candy before dinner, or interrupts you while you're on the phone, or hits, or bites, or won't clean his room.

Common challenges, says Tiane Fox of the Mental Health Association of South Central Kansas. But some common responses - "Stop jumping!" "Don't grab!" "How **many** times have I told you to clean your room?" - may not be the **most** effective approach.

"We want children to be able to solve problems on their own, or maybe even prevent them from happening," Fox said.

Conflict resolution for preschoolers? The concept is taking off in Wichita, thanks in part to "I Can Problem Solve," a program used at the Opportunity Project preschools and taught to parents in workshops.

By next fall, officials expect the program to be adopted by every HeadStart and public pre-kindergarten class in Wichita. It is being funded by a three-year, \$1.4 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The program, designed by developmental psychologist Myrna Shure and used in schools throughout the country, focuses on critical thinking and communication skills. Its goal is to reduce disruptive behavior at school and at home.

It seems to be working so far. During a pilot project at the Opportunity Project center in south Wichita, teachers identified 49 out of 77 preschoolers as having disruptive behavior. After completing the program, 90 percent showed a reduction in negative behavior.

"Huge improvement," said Tiffany Denton, a teacher at the Opportunity Project center. "There's a lot less need for teachers to intervene. The children learn to use their words, and they learn about emotions, and they really do solve problems."

Teaching how to think

The basic idea is this: When you simply tell children what to do or how to behave - even if you explain why - you're doing the thinking for them. They may do what you want, but compliance seldom lasts.

The "I Can Problem Solve" approach - also called "Raising a Thinking Child" - teaches children how to think, so they can decide for themselves what or what not to do, and why.

For example, if a child jumps in the bathtub, some common responses might be, "Please stop. I will feel sad if you get hurt," or "Tubs are for bathing," or simply, "Don't do that!"

The "I Can Problem Solve" approach, on the other hand, might go like this:

Adult: "Is that a good place to jump?"

Child: "**No.**"

Adult: "What might happen if you do that?"

Child: "I could fall down."

Adult: "How might you feel if that happens?"

Child: "Sad. I could get hurt."

Adult: "So what can you do so that will not happen?"

Child: "Don't jump."

Adult: "Right! You're such a good problem solver!"

It takes **more** time, says Fox, who teaches the program, but "the benefits are enormous."

"Taking the time to lead a child through this process helps them really think," she said. "It can be the **most** powerful thing, when you figure out how to really do it and do it right."

Beyond that, Fox said, the program encourages adults to take time and talk with children, a practice that leads to improved language and social skills.

Expanding the program

**Many** parents, too, say they like the concept.

Maria Vielmas, whose 4-year-old daughter, Giselle, attends the Opportunity Project center, didn't want to attend a parent workshop at first. But after the first session, she learned techniques that helped not only with her preschooler, but also with her three older children.

"This is something that teaches how to take care of kids and deal with the problems you have," Vielmas said.

Her 10-year-old son, Hernan, was a reluctant reader, Vielmas said. After trying the "I Can Problem Solve" approach, having Hernan come up with reasons why regular reading time is beneficial, Vielmas says he's reading **more** often and without complaint.

Vielmas has completed four parent sessions so far, and hopes to attend **more**. "I think this would be helpful for everybody," she said.

To date, 16 teachers and 188 parents have completed the "I Can Problem Solve/Raising a Thinking Child" curriculum through the Knight Foundation grant. It currently is limited to the Opportunity Project and HeadStart preschools, but plans call for the program to be expanded to Wichita pre-kindergarten classes, a move that could reach thousands **more** children and parents.

A partnership with ChildStart may broaden the program even further, reaching home-based child-care providers.

Denton says you can see results in her preschool classroom, where, during one recent morning, two youngsters poking and pestering each other during story time learned to solve the problem and stop the poking.

"When you see how well it works," she said, "you think, maybe this is something we need for adults."

Reach Suzanne Perez Tobias at 316-268-6567 or stobias@wichitaeagle.com.



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