

# FOCUS

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## I Can Problem Solve

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University  
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The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) is in the midst of implementing several multi-year impact initiatives that continue through fiscal year 2011. These initiatives are driven by teams of Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development district and state Extension specialists and county Extension educators across the state.

One of these impact initiatives, *Growing Strong Families*, is working to reduce high-risk behaviors in children and youth. This is in response to serious concerns that have been repeatedly identified by citizens and stakeholders in communities statewide.

On average, every year in Oklahoma:

- 6,000 youth under the age of 19 drop out of high school
- 24,000 arrests involve children or adolescents
- 2,300 babies are born to school-age teens
- more teens engage in smoking, alcohol use, sexual activity, violence and weapon carrying than the national average

(Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy KidsCount Factbook 2006-2007; Oklahoma Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2003)

The many harmful or unhealthy risks encountered by children and youth can impact long-term productivity and healthy functioning. These elements, in turn, add costs to communities and the state and limits our human capital potential. Research has identified specific experiences, skills, relationships, values and qualities which have a positive influence on young people's lives. However, according to the Search Institute, the average young person experiences less than half of these critical assets. Building these protective factors in homes and communities can buffer children and youth from risky behaviors and promote their positive development.

The development of social competence during the early and middle-childhood years, including interpersonal problem-solving skills, aids in preventing high-risk behaviors later in childhood and adolescence. Therefore, a specific strategy of the *Growing Strong Families* initiative has been to implement the *I Can Problem Solve* (ICPS) program for pre-school through elementary school-age children. Evaluation results are promising and indicate that the thinking skills and behavior of children who received the ICPS program were significantly and positively impacted compared to children who did not receive ICPS. Conducting such an evaluation can be very complicated. This was achieved due to a high level of cooperation between teachers, extension educators and OSU faculty researchers. The following pages provide more details about this work.



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# The Growing Strong Families Impact Initiative

With the goal of reducing high-risk behaviors in Oklahoma's children and youth, *Growing Strong Families* has focused on:

- increasing positive development approaches and building social competence in children and youth such as problem-solving, decision-making, communication skills, interpersonal relationships, responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution;
- strengthening parent involvement and skills for positive parent-child communication and family relationships;
- providing training to teachers and child care providers to enhance quality of classroom and out-of-school programs;
- delivering educational resources to communities including children, youth, parents and caretakers, teachers and service providers, volunteers, agencies and schools;
- enhancing public awareness of risks facing children and youth; and,
- increasing positive community assets and support for children, youth, and families.

## *I Can Problem Solve* Program

After reviewing numerous evidence-based curricula and piloting by county Extension educators during 2005, the impact team selected an innovative, research-based curriculum entitled *I Can Problem Solve* (ICPS) developed by Myrna B. Shure, Ph.D. at Drexel University in Philadelphia. ICPS is a classroom approach to teach children in preschool and primary grades thinking skills that can be used to help resolve or prevent "people" problems.

In 2006, ICPS training was provided by an associate of Dr. Shure to members of the *Growing Strong Families* impact team. Toolkits of resource materials for county educators and teachers were developed and provided as training guides. In early 2007, the impact team launched

the *I Can Problem Solve* program. Extension educators recruited local preschool, Head Start, or elementary school (K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade) teachers. The county educators provided individual training and technical assistance on the ICPS program to the teachers and, in some areas, teacher aides or counselors. The program was utilized by the teachers in their classrooms. Additionally, some county educators co-facilitated or directly presented lessons to the children. Each class received specific ICPS lessons over 10 to 12 weeks.

**During the past two years, ICPS has been implemented in at least 83**

**classrooms in 50 school sites reaching approximately 850 children. Training was provided to 132 adults in these schools.**

The use of ICPS is continuing in Oklahoma. In April 2009, an ICPS refresher training was provided to the county Extension educators currently on the *Growing Strong Families* impact team. The team is now considering how to expand ICPS to additional school, child care, Head Start, and out-of-school settings and to areas beyond those represented on the impact team.

### ICPS helps:

- Teach children *how* to think, not *what* to think
- Guide children to think for themselves
- Teach children to evaluate their own ideas
- Encourage children to come up with many solutions to problems on their own

### Children learn:

- A problem-solving vocabulary
- Identifying and expressing one's own and others' feelings
- Considering other points of view
- Awareness of timing and chain of events
- Listening and paying attention
- Thinking of more than one solution
- Considering consequences
- Evaluating various solutions and ideas

### ICPS program methods:

- Games, stories, puppets, role-playing, and group interaction
- Dialoguing techniques to demonstrate and reinforce skills
- Guiding use of skills in real-life daily situations
- Integrating ideas into standard classroom curriculum

### County Extension Educators participating in *Growing Strong Families*

Beckham	Harper	Kiowa	Noble	Pottawatomie
Cotton	Jackson	Major	Oklahoma	Pushmataha
Craig	Kay	Murray	Pontotoc	Sequoyah
				Tillman

Cleveland, Haskell, Hughes, and McCurtain counties also participated in 2007-2008

# ICPS Shows Positive Impact on Children and Teachers

Past research shows that children trained with ICPS improve positive behaviors such as empathy for peers and reduced negative behaviors such as impulsivity, impatience, over-emotionality, physical and verbal aggression, and social withdrawal (Shure, 2001). Increases in academic achievement, a more positive classroom atmosphere and less time spent by teachers handling conflicts are additional benefits.

For the *Growing Strong Families* impact team's pilot implementation of ICPS in 2007 - early 2008, the effectiveness of the program on young children's interpersonal problem-solving skills and social behavior was evaluated. County educators interviewed each participating child and probed them for multiple ways to solve hypothetical problem situations. The students' responses were later analyzed to measure the quantity and type of solutions. Additionally, teachers filled out surveys rating each child's classroom behavior. Both procedures were done before the program started and again after it concluded. For a more accurate comparison, the same information was collected from classrooms that did not receive ICPS. In total, 34 classrooms of 368 students in 16 counties were included in the study.

**The results show a promising impact. Students who received ICPS showed significant positive changes in problem-solving skills and behaviors when compared to the control group children. Improvements included:**

- thinking of more solutions to problem situations;
- increased positive and passive solutions and decreased solutions involving manipulation and telling or tattling;
- higher levels of socially competent behavior, positive social skills, and academic skills; and
- lower levels of aggression.

Surveys of participating ICPS teachers

and child care providers reported:

- 67 percent "much" or "very much" changed their practices and interactions with the children in the classroom as a result of the program and learned techniques from the program useful for managing the class; another 19 percent "moderately" changed;
- approximately 90 percent rated the program's overall effect on children's behavior and the classroom/group atmosphere as "somewhat good" or "very positive;"

- nearly 90 percent were satisfied overall with the ICPS program.

These evaluation findings suggest that the *I Can Problem Solve* program may benefit a diverse general population of children in rural as well as urban school and community settings. The Cooperative Extension Service can be an effective system to deliver programs such as ICPS in school settings which often have limited resources for research-based prevention programs.



Lisa Hamblin, Oklahoma County Extension Educator (left), watches a kindergarten teacher present ICPS at Western Oaks Elementary School.

## Comments from teachers using *I Can Problem Solve*

Children are...

- "using vocabulary words to solve their problems"
- "developing solutions on their own"
- "more creative at looking for alternatives"
- "actively considering different ways to deal with situations"
- "recognizing other emotions in their friends...they are more aware of others"

"It got me to think more about how I talk to the children..."

"...great to use to apply to real problems that come up throughout the day"

"Students became more aware of the effect their behaviors have on others as the year progressed. In our younger students (pre-K and K), we saw an overall improvement in social skills (less fighting, less tattling for small problems, more expression of feelings). With 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students, I noticed more thinking before acting."

"During playground duty I've heard students trying to resolve conflicts on their own and they have used the ICPS tools!"

FOCUS is a publication designed to direct attention to innovative Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs and to share program philosophy and updates of new and changing program directions. Your comments and suggestions for future issues are welcomed and appreciated. Please send all correspondence to FOCUS, Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension, 135 HES, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078. FOCUS is published three times yearly by the Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension program.

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Extension Educators present an ICPS workshop at the Oklahoma Indian Head Start Directors Association Pre-Service, August 2009. (l-r) Julie York (Noble Co.), Mary Rhyne (Kay Co.), and Tari Lee (Craig Co.)

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