



# Promoting Early Childhood Mental Health through Evidence-based Practice

Implementation of the *Incredible Years* in Ramsey County, Minnesota

Gael Thompson, MSW, LICSW

In 2004, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation introduced the *Incredible Years* programs to the community. This set of evidence-based programs is designed to teach positive interaction skills, social problem-solving strategies, anger management, and appropriate school behaviors to young children. The programs also strengthen parent-child relationships and help parents develop positive behavior guidance strategies.

## Mission of the Wilder Foundation

Wilder introduced the *Incredible Years* programs as part of their 100-year history of combining direct services, research, and community development to address the needs of the most vulnerable people in Ramsey County, Minnesota. Through more than 70 diverse programs and services, Wilder works with thousands of individuals every year to help them overcome barriers to learning, address mental health needs, live more independently, maintain affordable housing, and engage in their communities.

## The Continuum of *Incredible Years* Programs

The *Incredible Years* programs have two foci: (1) comprehensive treatment programs for young children with early onset conduct problems, and (2) universal prevention programs to promote social competence and prevent young children from developing conduct problems in the first place. The curricula are designed for teachers, parents, and children. The development of materials was guided by developmental theory and fit into an intervention pyramid with levels of



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intervention corresponding to universal, selective, and indicated prevention programs, plus an additional treatment program.

At Wilder, three of the *Incredible Years* programs have been implemented and two additional programs were added in November 2009:

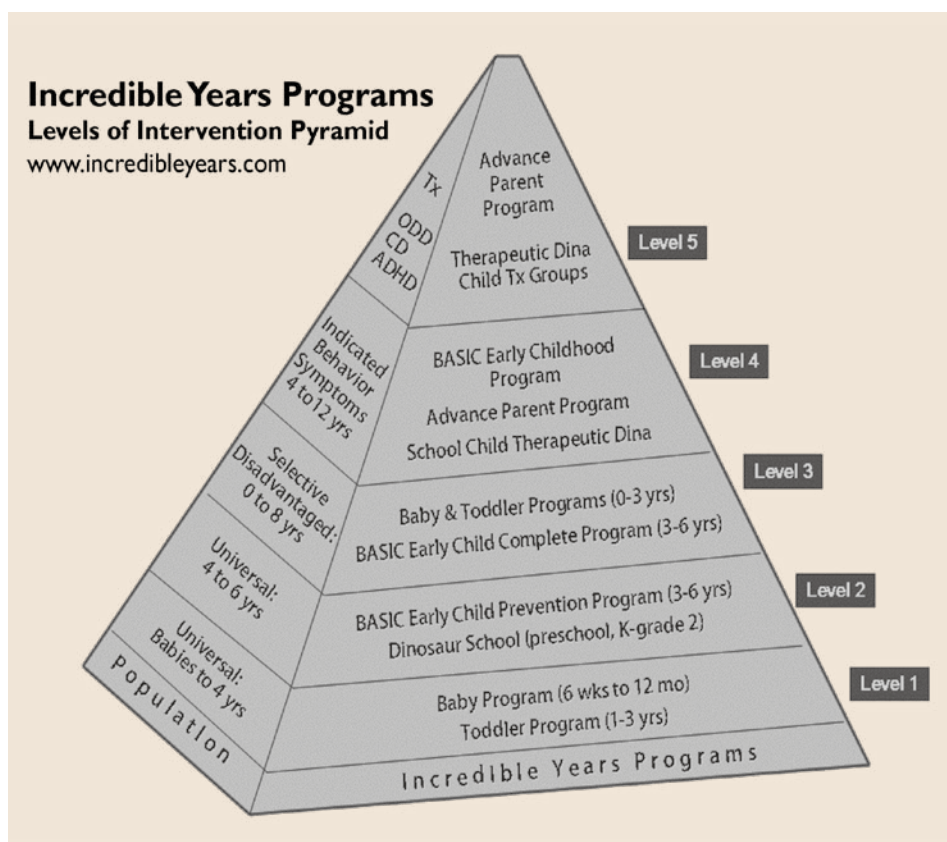
- ***Dina Dinosaur*** is a classroom-based prevention curriculum that teaches social problem-solving and self-regulation skills in order to prevent and reduce aggression at home and school (Level 2 of the intervention pyramid). It is delivered in the classroom two to three times a week in 15–20 minute circle time discussions followed by small group activities. For the past five years, the *Dina Dinosaur* curriculum has been implemented in Wilder's Child Development Center, an accredited full-day early child care and education program that works with some of the most vulnerable members in the community. In addition, Wilder trains and mentors other early childhood professionals to use the *Dina Dinosaur* curriculum, including those from Head Start, early childhood special education, and community-based child care centers.
- ***Dina small group therapy program*** is a treatment program (Level 5 of the pyramid) designed specifically for young children who show high rates of aggression, defiance, and oppositional or impulsive behaviors. It is delivered

in small group sessions for 20–22 weeks. In addition to the weekly therapeutic sessions for children, the *BASIC Parent Program* is offered to parents so they learn ways to foster healthy interactions at home similar to what their children are learning in the group.

- **Preschool BASIC parent program** is designed for parents of 3 to 6 year-olds. It focuses on strengthening children's social skills, emotional regulation, and school readiness skills. Parents are taught how to encourage cooperative behavior and how to use positive discipline by establishing rules, routines, and effective limit setting.
- **Parents and babies program** is designed for parents of infants (ages 0–12 months). The program focuses on helping parents learn to observe and read their babies' cues and learn ways to provide nurturing and responsive care, including physical, tactile, and visual stimulation as well as verbal communication.
- **Parents and toddlers program** is designed for parents of 1 to 3 year-olds. Parents learn how child-directed play promotes positive relationships, how to use emotion coaching to build children's emotional vocabulary and encourage their expression of feelings, how to build children's self-esteem through praise and encouragement, and how to teach age-appropriate self-care skills.

## Program Outcomes

In 2009, Wilder Research completed an outcome report of data collected since implementing the *Incredible Years* programs (2005–2009). Children showed statistically significant improvements in all five behavioral domains: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity-inattention, peer problems, and pro-social behavior. Parents and teachers reported that fewer children had difficulties with emotions, concentration, behavior, or getting along with others at discharge compared to intake. Parents who participated in the *Preschool BASIC Parent Program* demonstrated significant improvement from intake to discharge in six of seven parenting skills areas: appropriate discipline, harsh and inconsistent discipline, positive verbal discipline, praise and incentives, physical discipline, and clear expectations.



## National Award Recipient

On September 25, 2009, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration announced that Wilder's *Incredible Years* Program was selected as one of 27 nation-wide recipients of their 2009 Science and Service Awards. These awards recognize exemplary implementation of evidence-based interventions that have been shown to prevent and/or treat mental illness and substance abuse.

For more information about the early childhood programs offered at the Wilder Foundation, go to [www.wilder.org/432.0.html](http://www.wilder.org/432.0.html). For more information about the *Incredible Years* programs, please go to [www.incredibleyears.com](http://www.incredibleyears.com).

- *Gael Thompson, MSW, LICSW, is the Early Childhood Intervention Program Coordinator at the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Child Guidance Clinic, St. Paul, MN.*

*continued from page 19 Family Home Visiting*

## REFERENCES

Visit [www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/fhv/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/fhv/index.html) for information about the family home visiting program and [www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/fhv/newsletter/documents/summer2009.pdf](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mch/fhv/newsletter/documents/summer2009.pdf) for information about reflective practice.

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■ *Sharon Hesseltine, BSW, is a Child Development/ Infant Mental Health Specialist in the Family and Community Health Division of the Minnesota Department of Health*

*Jill E. Simon, MSW, LICSW, IMH-E\* (IV), is a Reflective Practice Consultant in the Family and Community Health Division at the Minnesota Department of Health.*