

Meet the child behaviour guru who was 'ahead of the curve'

Incredible Years founder Prof Carolyn Webster-Stratton on challenging children

Sheila Wayman Tue, Mar 17, 2020, 06:01



Prof Carolyn Webster-Stratton is not a household name in Ireland but many families around the country have benefitted from the fruit of her life's work over four decades.

She's the founder of the [Incredible Years](#) (IY) parenting programmes and even if you haven't done one yourself, the chances are you know someone who has. What's more, through her programmes for children and teachers, IY has "entered into the fabric of the educational system", says Seán McDonnell, deputy CEO of [Archways](#), which has led the way in

implementing Webster-Stratton's strategies here since 2006.

"For me, you can't really throw a rock without hitting some aspect of her programme – whether it's in a school or in a community centre. It has been disseminated widely," he says. And of Webster-Stratton, he observes: "I think she was a little bit ahead of the curve and she has always managed to stay that little bit ahead of the curve."

Ireland is one of two dozen countries to have imported the evidence-based IY programmes from their Seattle base. But their developer is quick to remind *The Irish Times* that for all the talk of these being "American" programmes, she is Canadian.

"These days, I am more Canadian than ever," quips Webster-Stratton, in a transatlantic phone interview ahead of a planned visit here, coronavirus permitting, to deliver a public lecture to celebrate 20 years since the establishment of Maynooth University's department of psychology. But, as her work has shown, nationality is irrelevant when it comes to children's challenging behaviour and the best ways to address it. A tantruming toddler or truculent tween speak much the same language, no matter where they live.

IY is a series of programmes that aim to assist in preventing or treating behaviour problems and to promote social and emotional competence in children – the fundamentals for doing well in school and life. The essence of the approach is that relationships are key and that parents and teachers need to respond positively to behaviour they want to see more of and to try to ignore the "acting out", because children crave attention.

The use of praise and selective attention would be common to many other parenting programmes now but there are, of course, many other aspects that have contributed to the enduring success of IY. Not least Webster-

Stratton's tireless adapting of programmes both to meet the changing needs of families and to apply the latest scientific knowledge about brain development.

So, what made her a pioneer and how does she keep "ahead of the curve" when the parenting landscape has changed so much in 40 years?

Now Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington, Webster-Stratton (72) never had a "master plan" to become an academic professor and run a business training others. But innovation was in her blood because her father, Len Webster, was the inventor of the O-Cedar sponge mop: "I designed this so women didn't have to wash floors by crawling on the floor", he said later.



Parents and teachers need to respond positively to behaviour they want to see more of and to try to ignore the 'acting out', because children crave attention. Photograph: iStock

She herself first trained to be a nurse, then as a clinical psychologist, and IY had its beginnings in her attempts to find more effective ways of helping

families.

'People thought I was nuts'

She was working in Alaska in the 1970s when she realised it wasn't enough to talk to parents about what they should try, she needed to get into homes and help parents practise new ways of engaging with their children. She also saw the power of using video playback – a relatively expensive, cumbersome technique in those days – in the training process.

"People thought I was nuts," she admits. "I was investing my own money. I just believed so much in the power of practice and showing them their own video, and then that people can learn from each other."

She still remembers the first mother she worked with in this way - "she had a powerful impact on me". After being shown the edited tape of her interactions with her child, the woman started to cry.

"I have always seen my mother as very critical but have never seen the same behaviour in myself," she said.

"It was like an instantaneous insight for her," says Webster-Stratton, who followed through by coaching the woman from behind a one-way mirror with a "bug in the ear", as she learned to use a different language to respond to her child.

"She understood why and then she saw incredible changes in her child. That was a powerful thing for me and the reason I did my very first study."

In an amusing aside about that case, she recalls that while children were not supposed to hear the coaching voice in their parent's ear-piece, sometimes they did. And on one occasion that child innocently inquired of her mother: "What is God telling you now?"

The academic rigour that Webster-Stratton brought to IY laid the foundation for both its success and continuing relevance. It's not enough to believe programmes such as these are helpful, the application of hard science is needed to prove their worth, to justify government funding and to make improvements.

"I really believe in research – randomised controlled trials," she says. They have been a constant feature of the programmes, testing both emerging strands and their implementation in other countries.

Irish parenting research

Archways, with € 1 million funding from Atlantic Philanthropies, commissioned Maynooth University's psychology department in 2007 to research the effectiveness of the parent, teacher and child components of IY that were being rolled out here. Conducted over nearly five years, the research was the largest systematic study of an early years behaviour programme in Ireland and one of the largest community-based evaluations of the programme to be conducted outside the US at that time.

The research was led by Dr Sinead McGilloway, who is founder director of the department's centre for mental health and community research, and it was on her suggestion that Webster-Stratton, who has both professional and popular appeal, was invited back to address the anniversary event.



Prof Sinead McGilloway, founder director of the department's centre for mental health and community research.
Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill/The Irish Times

"I loved that project; the money allowed us to do such really good, methodologically rigorous research," says McGilloway. Its many positive findings showed policymakers here the likely longer-term benefits of IY intervention programmes for tackling childhood adjustment problems in the home and at school.

IY features in the centre's ongoing ENRICH study (the title being an acronym contrived from "Evaluation of wRapararound in Ireland for CHildren and families") as two of its programmes are included in the UpTo2 early parenting support system that has been evaluated.

Although Webster-Stratton began by targeting children aged three and four, IY programmes now span the 0-12 age range. At the outset she believed one way to address the problem of out-of-control children in classrooms was to start working with those who were already displaying problematic behaviour in pre-school.

She cites a piece of subsequent research (2003) led by Prof [Richard Tremblay](#), UCD professor of early childhood development, which, using longitudinal data, tracked patterns of physical aggression from birth to 30 years of age. Categorised into four groups of showing "little", "some", "modest" or "high" aggression, their levels all peaked around age two to three years but only those showing high aggression at that age peaked again during adolescence, while their peers' aggression reduced and stabilised.

"Most kids will bite, yell and hit, tantrum," she says but some do it at a much higher frequency and intensity than others. "Like 99 per cent non-compliant to requests – they are just oppositional." Childcare staff can generally identify such children because they are usually "outliers" in early care and education settings.

Acting out

There are all sorts of reasons for this sort of acting out by children, she says, ranging from developmental issues and language delays to temperament and family dynamics. However, the danger is that, without appropriate interventions, these children are heading for a negative spiral.

"They start failing at school, the risk factors escalate and then they start developing a peer group that is similar" – leading to that new peak of aggression in the teenage years, when it is far harder to help them change their behaviour. They are then at greater risk of engaging in crime, addiction, being unemployed and having mental health problems.

"I started out in the 1970s when a lot of research was coming out around things like time out and attachment, being child directed versus parent directed. I think I felt right from the beginning that I was not in any one of those camps. Although some people would categorise me as a

behaviourist, I would kind of shudder as I was always really concerned with thought process and feelings as well as behaviour."

She says she doesn't know whether she was "just lucky following the really good research at the time" but she didn't feel she had to choose between one approach or the other but rather put together what she saw as the best of them all in a sequence that she thought was important.

Webster-Stratton began with one parenting programme called Basic and it evolved from there. Trying to cover different, developmentally appropriate strategies within one programme was proving too confusing for parents. "That is why I began to break down the programme according to the development stage of the child."

Having embarked in this field without first-hand experience of parenting, it was only after the birth of her son and daughter, now in their early 30s, that she could really understand how parents' emotional reactions can sabotage what they know they should be doing.

"That is when I developed the advanced programme." It helps parents deal with anger management, depression, seeking support and problem solving, aspects of which she also then incorporated in the basic programme.

Changing societal attitudes have also influenced the direction of IY. The biggest thing, she suggests, was the wider awareness that high risk children don't outgrow behaviour problems and that the earlier they are helped to resolve them the better. There is also broader acceptance now that governments have a part to play in supporting families and protecting children – parents' privacy no longer trumps all.

The value for a child of home and school working together has also been increasingly recognised. We now see, she says, that schools have a role to

play in supporting parents and that teachers can have a profound impact on a child's outcome.

"The other thing that is new is all the research on brain development and how parents and teachers can make such a huge difference on that development in the early years," she continues. "I started my studies when kids were three and four and it wasn't until I was retired, essentially, that I started baby programmes; I thought I was waiting too late."

Webster-Stratton, the author of several parenting books, is resisting pressure to put IY programmes up online so that people don't have to be brought together in groups, "because that is quick and dirty and cheap", she remarks. "I don't believe behaviour changes without relationships, without practice, without somebody coaching the practice."

When you're trying to change a pattern of parenting, that may have passed through generations, it's not going to happen just watching on the internet. She is also a big advocate of the group approach at a time when other societal trends are fragmenting families and isolating parents.

"The programme is more than about teaching parenting skills. It is about teaching how parents can support each other and learn from each other and build more of an extended support system within their communities."

Although publicly funded IY programmes are usually targeted at disadvantaged communities there's no doubt that they have universal value and "the attentive parent" one is, she says, designed for every parent.

"Everybody," she adds, "should be immunised with parenting principles."

Prof Carolyn Webster-Stratton is due to give a public lecture on 40 Incredible Years at the Department of Psychology, Maynooth University, Co

Kildare on Thursday, March 19th, at 6.30pm. Admission is free but registration is required [on eventbrite.ie](https://www.eventbrite.ie).

Incredible Years in Ireland

Every child at some point is going to show aspects of behaviour that are difficult to manage, says psychologist Seán McDonnell who is both deputy CEO and the research and training manager at Archways in Dublin.

Involved in the trialling of Incredible Years (IY) in Clondalkin, Dublin, beginning in 2006, he has since seen it rolled out to great effect in both community and school settings.

Currently he is involved in running a variation of the IY programme that is designed specifically for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), working with up to 700 families in Belfast and in Co Louth.

“The results of that process have been extraordinary in terms of changes in behaviour in both parents and also in terms of changes in the child’s concentration, impulsivity, inattentiveness,” says McDonnell who is one of three accredited IY mentors on the island of Ireland.

Some 2,244 people have been trained in the Republic as certified group leaders to deliver various IY programmes, with another 1,513 in the North, according to figures up to last December from IY. That figure for the Republic breaks down into different strands as follows: 959 for the parent one; 975 (child); 284 (teacher) and 159 (baby).

The Department of Education and Skills’ [National Educational Psychological Service](#) (NEPS) has trained teachers over the past decade in IY Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM) and, since 2016, it has offered the programme to all teachers in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in

Schools) primary schools. About 2,300 teachers have attended the six-day IYTCM training, bringing the number of teachers trained by NEPS to around 5,000, according to a Department of Education and Skills spokesperson.

Participating teachers report a significant impact for themselves, their pupils and their relationship with parents.

"The training has brought about positive change in an impressive range of areas including changes in teachers' belief in their ability to effectively manage behaviour in the classroom, to engage students and to use appropriate instructional strategies to bring about change in their students," says the spokesperson. "Teachers who have attended the training have also reported a decrease in their level of distress and emotional exhaustion and an increase in their sense of personal accomplishment."



The value for a child of home and school working together has also being increasingly recognised. Photograph: iStock

Holistic approach

While most parenting programmes cover much the same topics, what makes IY unique, says McDonnell, is the way that it is nuanced by parents' involvement and that's why he believes the retention rate is so high.

"It isn't simply a parent intervention, it is a collective, holistic kind of approach. There are any number of really good parenting programmes out there but none manage to address all the risk factors while inculcating protective factors within the community."

The use of video gives parents a chance to see what to do and not to do. Even though some of the clips are very old now, he says, parents and teachers see themselves in those vignettes.

"Once they see themselves, they can identify what they need to do and what they need to change."

He believes the Columbine High School killings in 1999, in which two teenagers murdered 12 students and one teacher, forced the US to pay greater attention to addressing the problems of aggressive behaviour. Policymakers wanted interventions, such as IY, that had been scientifically proven to be effective.

Now, he adds, there are various excellent programmes coming from different jurisdictions, including here, such as John Sharry's Parenting Plus, and we're "no longer being led by the US in quite the same way".