

Parents and teachers working together

Carolyn Webster-Stratton and Tracey Bywater explain the importance of the home learning environment, and how schools and parents can work together to promote social and emotional growth and school achievement

THERE IS CONVINCING EVIDENCE THAT children's early home experiences contribute to school readiness. Children who grow up in homes with a nurturing, language-rich environment and positive parent-child interactions show more social competence, emotional literacy, conflict management skills, language development, and school readiness. Once children start school, positive parent-teacher relationships that support parental involvement in children's learning have further effects in promoting children's school engagement and academic achievement.

In the UK, the longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project has demonstrated the importance of the home environment. It was found that the quality of the home learning environment (where parents actively engage in activities with children) promoted intellectual and social development in all children. Although parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the quality of the home learning environment was more important. One of the

project's conclusions was that: "What parents do is more important than who they are".

Conversely, a stressful or non-nurturing home environment (including poverty or diminished parenting skills – such as lack of supervision, neglect, harsh discipline, or parents suffering from mental health issues) can be associated with delayed language and academic readiness, delayed social development, and increased conduct disorder.

Academic readiness

A recent US study by Fernald and colleagues showed that, by age 3, low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than higher-income children. If this language-exposure gap continues through preschool, by age 5 children from lower-income families are already two years behind their peers in vocabulary and school readiness skills. This creates the need for remediation even before the start of formal schooling. Since early vocabulary is connected to later success in reading comprehension, this language gap presents a barrier to future academic achievement. Furthermore, language and reading delays can contribute to the development of friendship problems, school drop-out, and conduct problems.

Conduct problems and mental health

Conduct problems are the most common reason for referral for psychological and psychiatric treatment in childhood and, if left unchecked, up to 40% of children with early behavioral difficulties develop conduct disorder. The prevalence of conduct disorder is reported to be 10% in the US and UK general population, rising to 20% in disadvantaged areas. Early onset conduct problems can lead to negative life outcomes, including lack of academic success, criminal behavior, and psychiatric disorders, with increased costs to the education, health, social, and criminal justice services.

A recent Cochrane review by Furlong and colleagues demonstrated that parenting programs for

3- to 12-year-olds at risk of developing conduct disorder promote positive parenting skills, enhance child social and emotional well-being, and reduce parental depression and stress. Enhancing social and emotional competence enables children to be more self-aware, to problem solve, to recognise their feelings, to be able to calm down more easily, to co-operate with peers and adult directions, and therefore be more "ready" and able to learn at school. Preventing and treating conduct problems in young children is a matter of public health importance and should begin as early as possible in the home learning environment, followed by home and education settings working together.

Incredible Years

The Incredible Years® (IY) series comprises developmentally based programs for parents, children, and teachers. These linked programs aim to strengthen positive parent, teacher, and child relationships and social support, in order to promote children's social and emotional competence and school readiness, and to prevent and reduce behavior problems, in young children.

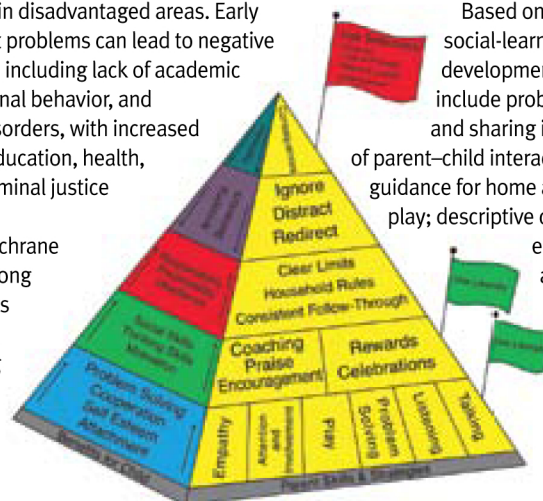
Parent program

Nine of the 13 studies included in the Furlong Cochrane review involved the IY basic parent program. IY parent programs are aimed at parents of children aged 0–12 years, and include baby, toddler, preschool (basic), and school-age programs, delivered over 10–20 weekly sessions to groups of 12 parents at a time by two trained facilitators.

Based on principles of cognitive social-learning, attachment, and developmental theories, sessions include problem-solving discussions and sharing ideas, video vignettes of parent-child interactions, role play, and guidance for home activities. Child-directed play; descriptive commenting; social, emotion, persistence, and academic coaching methods; effective limit-setting; proactive discipline; dialogic reading; and ways to

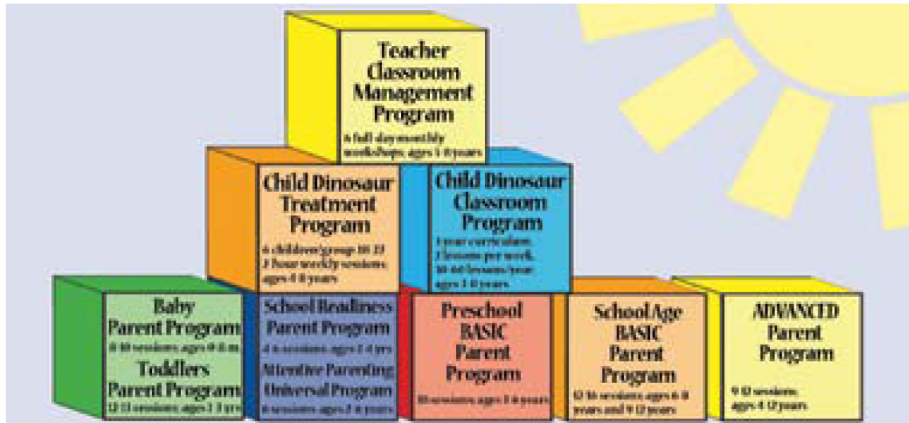
What we know

- The home environment, particularly parenting practices, impacts child social, emotional, and language development, and their academic readiness.
- Child social and emotional competence and behavior affects academic achievement.
- Incredible Years® (IY) parent programs:
 - Are effective in enhancing child social and emotional well-being and reducing conduct problems;
 - Are cost-effective;
 - Are transportable, that is, have been shown to work across many countries worldwide including the US, UK, Norway, New Zealand, Portugal, Ireland, and beyond; and
 - Can be delivered as part of a multi-modal system alongside the teacher and child IY programs for added child benefit.
- Additional research is needed to further explore the specific impact of IY parent programs on academic attainment.



PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

Social and emotional well-being



collaborate with day-care providers and teachers are covered.

Child program

The IY child program (dinosaur school) has two versions and is either delivered to the whole classroom (universal) through 60+ lesson plans, or in 18–22 two-hour weekly sessions to small groups of six children (therapeutic) who display some behavioral difficulties. It incorporates a curriculum to strengthen social and emotional competencies, such as understanding and communicating feelings, using effective problem-solving strategies, managing anger, practising friendship and conversational skills, and behaving appropriately in the classroom.

Teacher Classroom Management Program

The IY Teacher Classroom Management Program (TCM) is delivered to groups of teachers one day a month for six months and focuses on strengthening teachers' classroom management strategies, promoting children's prosocial behavior and school readiness, and reducing children's classroom aggression and non-cooperation with peers and teachers. The program also helps teachers work with parents to support their school involvement and promote consistency between home and school. The IY teacher book, *Incredible Years: Nurturing Children's Social, Emotional and Academic Competence*, has many useful ideas for how teachers can be even more effective at partnering with parents.

Evidence of success

Numerous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) by the developer, and by independent researchers, have shown that the IY parent series results in improvements in children's social and emotional literacy, problem-solving skills, and academic readiness (although additional research is needed to explore the impact on academic attainment).

High-risk families from culturally diverse backgrounds have shown significant improvements in positive parenting, involvement and contact with schools, and learning to focus

their attention on children's positive behavior. IY prevention studies with US Head Start families demonstrated the effectiveness of the IY parent program in improving positive parenting and reducing harsh discipline, resulting in reductions in children's aggressive behavior. Head Start preschool teachers reported significant increases in children's social competence and in parents' contact with schools. The IY parent program with additional parent training in academic skills, combined with teachers receiving the IY TCM program, resulted in findings similar to the above trial with significant increases in parent-teacher bonding.

A later study in primary schools involved all teachers receiving the IY TCM, all children receiving the IY dinosaur school child program, and parents of children with behavior problems being offered the IY parent program. Significant reductions in children's externalizing problems and increases in emotional regulation were found. Teachers reported that mothers receiving the parent program were significantly more involved in school, and children demonstrated fewer externalizing problems in the classroom compared with the control condition.

These studies indicate the benefit of offering the IY series in schools, in terms of enhancing parent-teacher partnerships, and improving children's behavior in home and in school. It is important to recognize the role of schools in establishing partnerships with parents of challenging children, and encouraging parents to access support to enable their children to benefit from education.

The last word

School-based social-emotional learning programs are cost saving for the public sector, with education services likely to recoup the cost of the intervention in five years. Lack of investment in well-being (mental health) promotion in schools is likely to lead to significant costs for society.

Despite knowing what works to reduce – or prevent – difficult behavior and promote social and emotional competence and academic readiness, some evidence-based programs still

struggle to be successfully scaled up. Barriers to successful implementation, particularly with regard to fidelity and cost need to be addressed.

IY is a good example of an evidence-based intervention that can “go to scale”, and help parents and teachers work together to achieve common goals.

About the authors

Carolyn Webster-Stratton is Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington. She has developed and researched the Incredible Years programs in prevention and treatment populations over the last 35 years, and has written many research articles and chapters, as well as books for parents, teachers, and children. She currently provides consultations and training to others who research and deliver these programs.

Tracey Bywater is a Reader in the Institute for Effective Education at the University of York, focusing on the theme of enhancing parental input in supporting children's success. She is also an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the School of Psychology, Bangor University, and Chair of the Board of Trustees for the Children's Early Intervention Trust.

Further reading

Incredible Years website (and IY research article library) <http://incredibleyears.com/>

Fernald A, Marchman VS, and Weisleder A (2013), SES Differences in Language Processing Skill and Vocabulary are Evident at 18 Months. *Developmental Science*, 16, 234–48.

Furlong M, et al (2012), Behavioural/Cognitive-behavioural Group-based Parenting Interventions for Children Age 3–12 with Early Onset Conduct Problems (Review). *Cochrane Library*. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD008225.pub2/abstract>

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Webster-Stratton C, Reid MJ, and Hammond M (2001), Preventing Conduct Problems, Promoting Social Competence: A Parent and Teacher Training Partnership in Head Start, *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 30(3), 283–302.

Reid MJ, Webster-Stratton C, and Hammond M (2007), Enhancing a Classroom Social Competence and Problem-solving Curriculum by Offering Parent Training to Families of Moderate-to-High-Risk Elementary School Children. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 36(5), 605–20.