

ICAN's positive reinforcements help young people



BY SHELBY PEDERSEN
Guest Writer

Positivity can be a very powerful tool with youth. Positive reinforcements are a great way to instill encouraging, optimistic

feelings.

At ICAN, we work with youth who deal with many struggles in their daily lives. This can lead to sizeable behavioral issues and the natural tendency for most adults is to "penalize" children for poor behavior. This may show up as yelling, lecturing, or other negative reactions.

We take a different approach with these youth – with all of our youth. Our staff uses purposeful, positive statements with youth every day that appreciate them for their unique skills and abilities and provide praise when they've followed directions, met a goal or been kind to one another.

These tactics are something that every

parent, teacher or youth care worker can utilize.

All of our programming at ICAN is evidence-based, which means it's based on scientific research and typically endorsed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

One of those curricula is called PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies). The PATHS program is grounded in the science of children's brain development, which has determined that children experience and react to strong emotions before developing the cognitive abilities to verbalize them.

One of the main education objectives of PATHS is to enhance children's self-esteem, self-confidence, and ability to give and receive compliments. Research has shown that youth learn best and show higher motivation within the context of positive attachments.

Much of this ties in with the Golden Rule, something that threads through

most of the PATHS activities that we teach. For example, in one activity we break the kids into groups and give them a series of scenarios to discuss.

These scenarios include: "You said something mean to your mom and hurt her feelings" and "You have to do your homework, but you don't want to. Your parents remind you to do it now!"

Youth discuss how they would feel in that situation, how does their parent feel, what they could do if they were the parent and what they could do themselves, using the Golden Rule.

Our staff uses many different types of positive reinforcements with our youth. If a staff member sees a group of youth misbehaving and not staying on task, they don't scold that group, they find a group nearby who is working well and compliment them so that everyone can hear.

If they see youth running down the hall instead of walking, they say "why don't you come back and try that again"

instead of yelling "Stop! You can't be running." It takes a great deal of effort and forethought – rephrasing what we are so quick to yell out.

Our staff understands that character building takes time and commitment, it doesn't happen overnight.

So many of these tools are great for parenting in the home as well. I hope everyone will take a second to think through how much positivity they are sharing in the world today.

If you need some help, here are few suggestions from creativewithkids.com:

- You make me smile.
- I will do my best to keep you safe.
- I think about you when I'm not with you.
- I see you working and learning every day.
- Sometimes I will say no, I have faith in you. I know you can handle it.

–Shelby Pedersen is CEO for ICAN: Positive Programs for Youth. 