

MY TURN SHELBY PEDERSEN

Staying positive is key to working with youths



Positivity can be a very powerful tool with youths.

Positive reinforcements are a great way to instill encouraging, optimistic feelings. At ICAN, we work with youths who deal with many struggles in their daily lives.

This can lead to sizable 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 youths — with all of our youths. Our staff uses purposeful, positive statements with youths 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 and 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 youths 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 se-

ries 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!”

Youths 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 youths.

If a staff member sees a group of youths misbehaving and not staying on task, they don’t scold that group, they find a group nearby that is working well and compliment them so that everyone can hear.

If they see youths 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 of ICAN: Positive Programs for Youth.