

ICAN program helps kids in middle school



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Guest Writer

Many parents know that middle school can be a nerve-wracking few years. So much growth and change occur with youth as they transition to high school – they transform into young adults right before your eyes.

At ICAN, we see this transition among youth in our afterschool program all the time. We also see the struggles that their parents face with this transition. Our program team works with our parents in a variety of ways each month – focusing on positive parenting skills and communication with youth.

They decided to tackle this transition to high school with youth and parents through the “Bridges” program. This curriculum was introduced to ICAN through Arizona State University and the work of Nancy Gonzales and Larry Dumka.

Bridges is a program for middle school youth and their parents to attend together. It is designed to increase school engagement and achievement, strengthen family-school linkages, and prevent adolescents’ social, emotional, and behavioral challenges.

The skills presented through the

Bridges program are important for any parent facing the middle school years. ICAN is the first to offer the Bridges program through a nonprofit agency.

Students work together to explore their aspirations and the role of education in reaching them. They learn strategies to achieve long term personal goals and practice life skills to manage problems and challenges.

Parents work together to increase awareness and understanding of adolescents’ changing emotional and educational needs. They learn skills to strengthen communication and positive bonds with their students, structure and monitor their students’ activities and opportunities, and manage adolescents’ emotional problems and risky behavior.

One of our families that participated last year at Willis Junior High recently reached out to ICAN to share a follow up on their family plan. The mom shared that her son was having some challenges deciding what high school he wants to attend next year.

She said her son had been practicing some of the coping skills learned in the program and that she had been able to listen more carefully to her son’s reasons (see *CONNECT skills below*) instead of reacting.

Mom said that, thanks to Bridges, they were able to make an action plan, and have been visiting the different schools to learn together about their

options.

Without Bridges, she said, “My husband and I would have ‘forced’ our son to attend the school of our choice, but thanks to what we learned in the program, we have been able to support our son better and make a decision together.”

What skills can you utilize on your own from the Bridges program? Here are some of the skills that parents who attended the Bridges program report using the most.

Do a “checkup” on some of these skills. Most parents use these skills already, but middle school is a new challenging stage for the teens:

- **CONNECT** skills, to help you keep a strong and positive relationship with your teen so they trust that you care about them
- **WATCH** skills, to keep an eye out on your teen so you know what is going on
- **LIMIT** skills, to have rules and consequences so your teen can learn to be focused, responsible, and organized
- **FOCUS** skills, help you stay calm and keep your attention on doing what is best for your teen

Listening sounds simple, but parents are swift to offer quick solutions to their kids’ problems. Middle school

is the time when youth need to start figuring things out on their own. Help youth with skills to solve problems on their own, like identifying pros and cons of their options, listening and managing their emotions and asking for help when needed.

Avoid “praise with a kick.” When you praise your child for something they did good, but then follow that up with something critical.

An example might be: “Great job getting an ‘A’ on that test! But remember that you still have a ‘B’ in the class, so you have some work to do still.”

Practice “catch ‘em doing good.” Paying special attention to things they do good will increase their motivation to more good things, helping with their confidence and showing them how to be more positive toward others.

The Bridges program is based on academic research that confirms that the program significantly increases school engagement, which also mediates intervention effects on youth substance abuse and school dropout rates.

ICAN is offering the Bridges program to all of our sixth- and seventh-graders. I hope that these skills that we teach through the Bridges program will help many parents in our community successfully bridge their youth into high school. ■