

HOW TO THINK, NOT WHAT TO THINK: A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO PREVENTION OF HIGH RISK BEHAVIORS IN CHILDREN

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Abstract

This presentation will focus on I Can Problem Solve (ICPS), a research-based and field-tested, culture-free, school violence prevention program. Previously addressed and new, as yet unanswered, research questions will also be discussed, as well as practical strategies for helping young children prevent predictors of violence.

The ICPS program teaches children ages 4 through 12 how to think and resolve everyday conflicts with peers and adults. More than 20 years of research have shown that ICPS-trained children become more sensitive to their own and other's feelings, more aware of consequences of their acts, better able to think of alternative solutions to problems, and, beginning at age 8, better able to plan sequenced steps toward a goal. As children learn these Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (also called ICPS) skills, they display less physical and verbal aggression, inability to wait and cope with frustration, and social withdrawal—early high-risk behaviors that predict later violence, substance abuse, and depression. ICPS skills also foster prosocial behaviors, such as empathy, sharing, cooperation, and fairness. Implementation strategies for teachers, other school personnel, and parents are included.

In light of the current emphasis on the role of social and emotional learning in academic achievement, ICPS-trained youngsters gained significantly more than controls in standardized achievement test scores and, in the later grades, reading and math book grade levels. Although more research tracing the mechanisms of how and why social and emotional competence plays a role in academic achievement is needed, ICPS skills appear to reduce emotional obstacles to focusing on the task-oriented demands of the classroom.

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Introduction

There are many ways to change the behavior of children. One way is to demand, command, and humiliate with time-out or overpowering the child with comments: "If you two can't share the toy, I'll put it away, and neither of you can have it!" or "How many times have I told you not to grab toys!" This approach, called Power Assertion, or, the Power Approach may bring about the desired result in the short run, but it may leave the child feeling angry and frustrated and, over time, immune to being yelled at and to threats and demands. A second way is to tell the child what to do, rather than what not to do: "Why don't you share your toys?" or "Ask your friend for what you want." This Suggesting Approach, while more positive than the Power Approach does the thinking for the child, rendering the child dependent for help if the suggested solution doesn't work. A third approach is to explain why a given solution is or is not a good one: "If you grab toys, no one will play with you," or "If you hit people, you won't have any friends." This Explaining Approach includes the popular "I" message—"I feel angry when you hit people"—but it still does the thinking for the child. Teachers, parents, and other caregivers who use the Suggesting or the Explaining Approaches are engaged in a one-way monologue, and the child is a passive recipient instead of an active participant. And when the adult is doing all the talking and all the thinking, there is no way to know for sure if the child has heard a word that was said.

This paper will address a different way, a problem solving way, of talking with children in ways that will help them successfully resolve everyday problems and conflicts that come up with peers and adults. This Problem Solving Approach is based on 30 years of research with children ages 4 through 12, primarily low-income minorities in the inner-city, and service evaluations with a wide variety of income and ethnic groups nationwide. The birth of the Problem Solving Approach was based on a research question raised by my colleague George Spivack and me in 1968, when we asked, “Is there a different way to guide behavior in children, a way that focuses on how children think about what they do—rather than focusing directly upon the behaviors themselves?” This approach was further developed when we asked, “To what extent can parents and teachers influence children’s ability to think about and act on their behavior?”

Behaviors Examined

In the late 1960s and early 1970s when our research began, our interest lay in reducing and preventing behaviors that were associated with mental health dysfunction and in enhancing behaviors that promoted positive mental health. The negative behaviors that encompassed impulsivity were as follows:

- Aggression (physical): hits, pushes, or in other ways hurts or attacks other children
- Aggression (verbal): bosses, threatens, teases, dominates other children
- Petulance: persists when told he or she cannot have something; nags, demands, repeatedly asks for something
- Impatience: unable to wait, unable to take turns
- Poor emotional control: easily upset by peers (e.g., when teased, pushed, etc.) or adults or both (e.g., gets very upset or overemotional if things don’t go his or her way)

Negative behaviors also included the following behaviors:

- Timidity: fear of jumping into play with others, afraid to ask for what he or she wants
- Giving up: gives up too easily when denied a wish, doesn’t stand up for his or her rights
- Inexpressiveness: Doesn’t express even normal amounts of emotion (e.g., anger, disappointment, etc.)

We included three positive behaviors.

- Showing concern for others: offering to seek help for a child in distress, showing interest in other’s feelings
- Having good peer relations: being sought out for play or other activities
- Sharing and cooperating: being able to share and take turns and work toward a common goal with others

Importantly, the impulsive behaviors measured by Spivack and Shure (1974) for mental health functioning are now recognized by longitudinal research to be early high-risk predictors of later, more serious problems such as violence, substance abuse, and unsafe sex (e.g., Parker and Asher, 1987) while socially withdrawn behaviors are early predictors of later depression and, if serious enough, suicide (e.g., Rubin and Mills, 1988). Additionally, lack of positive, prosocial behaviors even in the absence of aggression have also been found to be predictive of later violence (Eron and Heusmann, 1984), suggesting that attention to both positive and negative behaviors is critical to the prevention of significant problems that confront our youth as they enter middle school, junior high school, and high school, and as they go beyond.

The Thinking Skills

To test the hypothesis that thinking skills can play a mediating role in behavior, Shure and Spivack (1972); Shure, Spivack, and Jeager, 1971), and Spivack and Shure (1974) laid the groundwork by first identifying the cognitive skills in the interpersonal arena that distinguished good problem solvers from poor ones. These skills, dubbed interpersonal cognitive problem solving, or ICPS skills, could be identified as early as age four. There are two such skills.

- Alternative solution skills refer to an ability to conceptualize different, relevant ways to solve interpersonal problems, such as wanting a toy that another child has, or keeping Mom from being angry after having broken an object of value.
- Consequential thinking skills refer to an ability to recognize multiple outcomes regarding “What might happen next?” if a particular act were carried out, for example, grabbing a toy, or hitting a child.

With alternative solution and consequential skills significantly related to negative and positive behaviors in all age groups studied (ages 4 through 12), more complex skills emerged, beginning at age 8.

- Understanding motives refers to an ability to appreciate why people might do what they do, such as engaging in dangerous things, moving from thinking about superficial, external reasons (e.g., “Nobody likes him so he doesn’t like anybody,” to reasons more below the surface (e.g., “Maybe people are always hurting her feelings,” or “Maybe he’s poor and would be embarrassed to invite anyone to his house”).
- Sequenced planning, or means-ends thinking, refers to an ability to think step-by-step how to reach a stated interpersonal goal (e.g., making friends), to recognize potential obstacles that could interfere with reaching that goal, and to appreciate that there are good and not-good times to act and that successful problem solving takes time.

In addition to ICPS skills, academic skills were measured, including Standardized Achievement Test Scores (beginning in grade 1) and Grade Book Levels in reading and math (beginning in grade 5).

Having found that regardless of measured IQ, a significant association existed between these ICPS skills and measured behaviors (ICPS-competent children were less likely to show negative behaviors, and more likely to show positive ones in all the age groups that we studied), it was still unclear from correlational research alone that ICPS skills might be an antecedent to adjustment. The next step was to develop an intervention that would test a linkage between ICPS ability and behavioral adjustment by experimentally altering ICPS skills and then observing changes in the child’s display of impulsive, withdrawn, and prosocial behaviors that are predictive of later, serious outcomes, such as violence, substance abuse, unsafe sex, depression, and suicide.

The Intervention Programs

The training programs, originally called Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (ICPS) and now called I Can Problem Solve (also ICPS), are designed for three age groups: preschool, kindergarten and the primary grades (generally through grade 3), and the intermediate elementary grades (through grade 6). The programs follow a script composed of daily lessons in game form, are divided into two sections—pre-problem-solving and problem-solving skills—and incorporate techniques for training, for maintaining interest, and for eliciting responses from the children.

I Can Problem Solve (for schools) is recognized as a noteworthy program by the Hamilton Fish Institute (2001); Raising A Thinking Child (ICPS for families) is recognized as an exemplary program by the Strengthening America’s Families Project in collaboration with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Preschool, kindergarten and the primary grades

The first series of exercises begins with lesson-games that help children focus on a set of word pairs that set the stage for later problem-solving thinking (Shure, 1992ab). Although the specific word pairs chosen at each age level may differ, the words *is* and *is not* can be understood by preschoolers when taught in game form (e.g., “This *is* a table; it *is not* a balloon”) so children can later evaluate whether their idea *is* or *is not* a good one. Words, such as *same* and *different* are taught so that youngsters can later see, for example, that hitting and kicking are kind of the *same* because they can both hurt someone, and think of a *different* way to solve the problem confronting them. The word *or* facilitates their developing awareness of alternatives—“I can do this *or* I can do that”—leading up to their considering, “This *is not* a good idea because of what *might* happen next.” As children move into kindergarten, the words *before* and *after* are introduced, as well as *if-then*, which can help them later think of consequences to acts by first recognizing, for example, that “*If* I hit him *before* he hits me, *then* he *might* hit me back,” “He hit me *after* I hit him,” and so on. Although these words may already be known by many children, their constant repetition in game form (such as, “Am I standing *or* am I sitting?” and “Is tapping my foot the *same* or *different* from patting my head?”) helps to establish their later use in an interpersonal context.

After about two or three weeks of games aimed at developing early word concepts, attention turns to the next level of the program, that of feeling words. With an understanding of words that designate feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, afraid and, in kindergarten and the primary grades, words such as frustrated, impatient, worried, and relieved, it is possible to learn that *different* people feel *different* ways about the *same* thing, that feelings change, and that there is more than one way to find out—by listening, by watching, and by asking. Understanding that everyone does not choose the same thing is an important concept because young children frequently assume that others would choose what they like, leading to several faulty conclusions in interpersonal relations.

After about eight weeks, the children are ready for the next series of lesson-games that teach the final problem-solving skills to be learned—solutions to problems and consequences to acts. With pictures, puppets, and role-playing techniques, an interpersonal problem between hypothetical children is created (by the children or by the adult). Incorporating the prerequisite word pairs and feeling word concepts described above, children are asked questions, as follows:

- What happened? What’s the problem?
- How is (first hypothetical) Child 1 feeling?
- How is (second hypothetical) Child 2 feeling?
- What happened when, for example, Child 1 grabbed Child 2’s toy?
- Who can think of a *different* way this problem could be solved so that Child 2 will not feel angry, for example, and Child 2 will not feel sad or frustrated?
- Who has way number 2? (This question is asked after the first child responds and the adult says, “That’s one way. The idea of this game is to think of lots of *different* ways this child could get, for example, to play with the toy.”)

After several lessons where children brainstorm solutions to problems with no value judgment placed on them by the adult, children are guided to evaluate whether a solution given is or is not a good one. They are then asked another question.

- What *might* happen next if Child 1 does that? In other words, is this a good idea or *not*?

In eliciting consequences, the goal is to help children think of empathic responses. Instead of thinking “I’ll get in trouble if I hit him,” empathic children think that “I might hurt him if I hit him,” “He’ll feel sad,” or “I don’t like to hurt people.”

The formal didactic lesson-games take about 4 months to complete when implemented daily for 20 to 45 minutes, and about 6 months if substituted for health, social studies, or language arts in grades 1 on up.

Real-life dialoguing

In addition to the didactic lesson-games, teachers and other school personnel are trained to help children associate concepts practiced in hypothetical situations with problems that come up in real life. For example, a teacher asked Rafael, who had just hit William, “What happened? “What’s the problem?” Rafael answered, “William took my truck!” The teacher then asked, “How do you think William felt when you hit him?” “Mad,” answered Rafael. “What happened when you hit William?” “He hit me back,” answered Rafael. Now the teacher asked a very important question. “How did you feel when he hit you?” Still angry, Rafael replied, “mad.” Continuing along the same line of questioning as used in the hypothetical situations, the teacher now said, “Hitting is one way to solve this problem.” She then asked, “Can you think of a *different* way to get your toy back so you both won’t be mad and he won’t hit you?” Rafael thought hard about this, and then said, “Maybe I could let him play with the wagon.”

Instead of demanding that William give the toy back, sending Rafael to time-out for hitting William, or even using more positive approaches, such as suggesting they share, or explaining the virtues of taking turns, the teacher included Rafael in the conversation. This kind of guidance, dubbed the ICPS dialogue, engages the child in a two-way conversation that turns him or her from a passive recipient to an active participant. With the help of ICPS dialoguing, Rafael began to associate how he thinks with what he does and how he behaves. Instead of feeling anger and frustration, he felt pride.

The intermediate elementary grades

The overall style and approach to problem solving for the intermediate grades (grades 4 to 6) is the same as that for younger children: to teach them how, not what to think in solving interpersonal problems (Shure, 1992c). Although isolated games are not taught using the initial word pairs, the word pairs are woven into the exercises to set the stage for the discussion of feelings, solutions, and consequences, as well as the new skills of understanding people’s motives, and means-ends thinking, which is also called sequential planning.

During a thrice-weekly, four-to-six-month period, the concept that there’s more than one way is stressed to develop a problem-solving thinking style. Children learn that there is more than one way to (a) explain another’s behavior at a given moment (e.g., “Maybe he didn’t wave at me because he doesn’t like me,” “Maybe his mother is sick and he’s running home,” or “Maybe he just didn’t see me”); (b) explain another’s behavior that is consistent over time (e.g., “Maybe he hurts others because he thinks it’s fun,” “Maybe he’s bullied at home,” or “Maybe he thinks that’s how he’ll make friends”); and (c) solve a problem and plan steps toward reaching an interpersonal goal. Children also learn that there is more than one way that others may react to what they do (i.e., that there are potential consequences). Just as teachers and other school personnel are trained in ICPS dialoguing to use with younger children in real life, teachers and other adults are trained to apply ICPS dialogues when real problems arise.

ICPS for parents

With interest in whether parents could become effective ICPS training agents, Shure and Spivack (1978) developed ICPS for use in families with children ages 4 to 7. As described in *Raising a Thinking Child*

(Shure, 2000), goals for parents include (a) increasing their awareness that their child's point of view might differ from their own; (b) helping them to recognize that there is more than one way to solve a problem; (c) increasing their understanding that thinking about what is happening may, in the long run, be more beneficial than immediate action to stop the problem; and (d) helping them to inspire a child to think by providing their children with a model of problem-solving thinking. The concepts are the same as those used by teachers of this age group, with the content of the problem situations revolving around peers, siblings, parents, and other figures of authority (e.g., a child complaining of being teased at school; two siblings, each feeling that the other gets more privileges; or a child who won't clean his or her room, or do what has been asked). Parents are also helped to (a) think about their own feelings and become sensitive to their child's feelings, (b) find out how their child views the problem, and (c) engage the child in the process of solving both hypothetical and real problems using the ICPS dialoguing technique.

ICPS Intervention Research

The second question that we asked involved the impact of the teacher and parent training programs on the thinking and behavior of young children. Our initial research with low-income, urban, African Americans, now supported by others in both low- and middle-income levels across ethnic groups (summarized in Denham and Almeida, 1987), is reported in detail in Shure (2001), Shure and Spivack (1982), and in Spivack and Shure (1974). Followed over a two-year period, the Subjects (Ss) were divided into four groups: trained nursery/control kindergarten; trained nursery/trained kindergarten; trained kindergarten/control nursery; never-trained controls. A summary of major findings, significant at least at the 0.05 level, is shown below.

Trained by teachers: preschool/kindergarten

- At the beginning of the preschool year, 36 percent of the 113 Ss to be trained were rated as behaviorally adjusted (not impulsive or inhibited), as were 47 percent of the 106 controls who were comparable in age, gender, Binet IQ range (70-147), and teacher-rated behavioral characteristics. In the spring after ICPS training, 71 percent of the trained Ss were rated adjusted, compared with only 54 percent controls.
- Of the 44 trained Ss who were rated as impulsive prior to training, and 30 controls, 50 percent of the trained Ss became adjusted compared to only 31 percent of the controls.
- Of the 28 initially inhibited trained Ss, 75 percent became adjusted, compared to only 35 percent of the 17 controls.
- At the six-month follow-up, with no further training during the kindergarten year, 71 percent of the still-remaining Ss rated adjusted at the end of preschool remained adjusted, compared with 42 percent of the 65 controls. One full year later, of the 30 trained and 27 never-trained controls, 77 percent of the trained retained their adjusted behavior, compared to only 30 percent of the controls.
- Of the 35 initially adjusted Ss first trained in kindergarten, and 27 controls, 83 percent of those trained were adjusted following training, compared to only 30 percent of the controls. Of 20 trained Ss and 16 controls who initially showed either impulsive or inhibited behaviors, 79 percent of the trained Ss were rated adjusted at the end of kindergarten, compared to only 6 percent controls.
- Among trained Ss, the Ss who gained in ICPS skills, especially alternative solution skills, also improved in measured overt behaviors, and these linkages were independent of initial IQ or IQ-change, suggesting that the behavior gains were associated with gains in the trained ICPS skills.

These findings support the hypothesis that ICPS skills do mediate behaviors and that behavior can be improved by teaching children how to think about what they do rather than by focusing directly on the behaviors themselves. The results also suggest that, if training is not conducted in preschool, kindergarten is not too late. Importantly, the percentage of adjusted controls decreased by the end of the two-year period, suggesting that ICPS intervention can reverse that trend.

Trained by teachers: intermediate elementary grades

With the primary aim to study the children who were first trained during their preteen years, 97 Ss (47 boys, 50 girls) were ICPS-trained in grade 5 and 92 (47 boys, 45 girls) were trained in both grades 5 and 6. These Ss were compared with 53 Ss, comparable in behavioral adjustment and ICPS test scores, who were trained in a Piaget-based critical thinking (CT) program in grade 5 and with 39 Ss (17 boys, 22 girls) who were trained in both years. Major findings (Shure, 1984) follow.

- Positive, prosocial behaviors (e.g., caring, sharing, attracting peers, and showing concern for the feelings of others in distress) significantly improved in ICPS-vs-CT-trained Ss, whether they were rated by teachers, peers, or independent observers.
- Impulsive peer-rated behaviors, such as aggression, over-emotionality, and impatience, decreased in the two-year ICPS-vs.-CT-trained groups by the end of grade 6 in both sexes, more dramatically in girls.
- Shy, peer-rated behaviors were significantly lower among ICPS-trained Ss than among CT-trained Ss at the end of grade 6 for both boys and girls.
- Linkage analyses support ICPS skills, particularly solution skills, as significant behavioral mediators of behavior change, especially as rated by peers, and most powerfully for prosocial behaviors. That is, Ss who improved most in solution skills also improved most in the extent to which they attracted, that is, were liked and sought out by peers and the extent to which they showed concern for others in distress.

Although an increase in positive behaviors did occur at the end of grade 5 among the ICPS-trained Ss, a reduction in negative behavior in this age group required two three-month exposures in grades 5 and 6 (compared to only one three-month exposure among 4- and 5-year-olds). Nevertheless, the data show that it is not too late for ICPS to have a beneficial impact on children's early high-risk behaviors at ages 10 and 11. Importantly, standardized achievement test scores and reading-grade book levels also improved significantly more than the CT-trained Ss, suggesting that the reduction in stress that is fostered by ICPS skills allows children to concentrate better on the task-oriented demands of the classroom and, subsequently, to do better in school. The notion that interpersonal problem-solving skills can reduce stress and result in better academic achievement has been supported by Elias et al. (1986).

Trained by mothers: preschool

Twenty pre-school children were trained at home in ICPS by their mothers and compared to twenty non-trained controls. There were 10 boys and 10 girls in each group. To study the maximum impact of ICPS on behavioral adjustment, their teachers rated 13 of the trained youngsters and 12 of the controls as impulsive, with 4 in each group rated as inhibited. The remaining Ss (3 trained, 4 controls) were initially rated as adjusted.

- Seventy-one percent of the initially impulsive or inhibited ICPS-trained Ss became adjusted after training, compared to 31 percent of the controls.
- Gains in solution skills are linked to gains in behavior.
- Mothers who learned best to use the ICPS dialogue approach when real problems came up had children who improved most in behavior.
- The improved behavior of children trained at home generalized to the school, suggesting that the benefits of ICPS are not situation-specific.

Trained by teachers and mothers: kindergarten/grade 1

Children trained in kindergarten or in kindergarten and grade 1 were followed through grade 4 (Shure 1993). Remaining throughout the entire five-year period were 252 Ss (120 boys, 132 girls).

- Whether trained by their teachers in kindergarten only, again by their teachers in grade 1, or by their teachers in kindergarten and their mothers in grade 1, ICPS-trained Ss showed fewer impulsive and inhibited behaviors than those who were never trained at the end of grade 4. This result occurred especially among those trained for two years by their teachers when rated by independent observers on the Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983) Direct Observation Form.
- In the teacher-and-mother-trained group, Ss whose mothers best applied the ICPS dialogue approach maintained their gains at the end of grade 4.

Across age groups, it appears that ICPS skills can be trained, that parents as well as teachers can be effective training-agents, and that these skills can enhance social adjustment and interpersonal competence. Although behavior gains do occur sooner in younger than in older children, it also appears that training children to think about what they do is an effective, promising approach for any age. Nevertheless, training at the younger ages does allow children to enjoy the school experience from a better behavioral vantage point, preventing predictive high-risk behaviors and nipping them in the bud—the goal being to decrease the probability of youngsters engaging in later, more serious behaviors as they approach their adolescent years.

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Biography

Myrna B. Shure, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist at Drexel University in Philadelphia, has conducted research and developed preventive interventions for children ages 4- to 12 since 1968. Her *I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)* program for preschool through grade 6 has received recognition by numerous national agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Hamilton Fish Institute. Her program for families, *Raising a Thinking Child*, is recognized as an exemplary program by the Strengthening America's Families project, in collaboration with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Dr. Shure's research has been recognized by the American Psychological Association's initiative—Psychology Matters—for research that has valuable applications and makes a difference in people's lives.