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Kids learn to SNAP out of fights

Made-in-T.O. program gives at-risk children tools to settle disputes without using their fists

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Seven-year-old Billy is bouncing his sponge ball. Scott wants a turn. He snatches.

"Hey, that's my ball. Can I have my ball back?"

"Nope."

Billy, an explosive child, ordinarily has one solution to this kind of problem – his fists.

But for the past few weeks, he has been attending the SNAP program for kids with serious behaviour problems at the Child Development Institute in Toronto. Through SNAP, which stands for Stop Now and Plan, Billy has learned a better way.

But it doesn't come easily. He grunts. He paces. He struggles to remember the SNAP strategies. Take a deep breath. Tell yourself you need to stop. "I want my ball back. I need to make a plan." Count to 10. One finger, two fingers, three fingers ...

"Can I have my ball back?"

"No."

Billy's right arm swings up into the air, hovers for a split second over Scott's head. Then he brings it down by his side in the trademark SNAP finger-snapping motion. Walk away.

"Pick a plan that's going to work for you, Billy," calls an adult from the side. "Pick something that's going to make your problem smaller, not bigger."

Billy mutters, walking in circles.

"Can I have my ball back?"

"No."

Tell the person how you feel. He looks Scott in the eye. "But that's my ball," he says quietly. "My mom bought me that ball. It's my favourite

Research finds program works

The SNAP program is noted for its reliance on proven research about children with behaviour problems and aggression and its continuous evaluation of results. Finding money for research is tough but Leena Augimeri says it's a critical part of the process. "We want to make sure we don't do more harm than good, we want to prove it works and we want it to be cost-effective."

Evidence of SNAP's success:

Recent randomized controlled trials have found that children who had been enrolled in the SNAP program exhibited less delinquent and aggressive behaviour. The change in behaviour continued 15 months later, follow-up studies found.

Research tracking 319 children who went through the program between 1985 and 1999 shows that by the time they reached

ball."

"Oh. Okay."

This role-playing exercise, captured on videotape, is Billy's Mount Everest. Like his peers in the Child Development Institute's renowned SNAP program for kids ages 6 to 12, he arrived with no tools or self-control and a history of aggressive behaviour that could spell a future of gangs and guns. Or jail. Or worse.

Kids who end up in the program are the 2 per cent of children under 12 with the most severe behaviour problems and conduct disorders. They steal, assault, bully, vandalize, skip school. Many are referred by police.

Orderly conduct

"These are the kids who will be in the system," says Leena Augimeri, director of the Centre for Children Committing Offences at the institute, which is internationally renowned for its research on childhood aggression and conduct disorders. Early intervention is their best hope.

SNAP, taught to groups of seven by specially trained staff, feeds them bite-sized strategies – like those Billy used – that help them stop and think before they act.

It may sound like plain old common sense. But the program has quietly built an international reputation. In 2001, there were five sites using the SNAP model. Now there are 83 in the GTA and far beyond, including Scandinavia, Europe, New Zealand and the U.S. A three-year national demonstration site is running in Miami-Dade. A Pittsburgh philanthropist has committed \$250,000 to set up a program there.

And this summer, a SNAP program is being set up at a day camp in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood, where increasing youth violence, shootings and gang arrests have generated headlines.

Che Latchford, 25, believes in that approach. Without the intervention, "I definitely know that I would be either be in prison or maybe not even here," says Latchford, who took his first SNAP session when he was 8 or 9, attended three years of SNAP-based summer camp, then joined a leader-in-training program and became a peer mentor and camp counsellor.

He now works full-time at the Child Development Institute. He's also earning his child and youth worker diploma at Centennial College. But he knows how hard it can be to turn kids around, especially if they are taught something in a clinical setting and plunked back home with no supports. At 14, he was back in trouble. Augimeri wouldn't give up on him. But he told her, "you need to teach me how to operate in my world."

Latchford grew up poor. His mother, trying to raise three kids on her own, was working all the time. His friends hung around his front door, trying to recruit him to their gang the minute he stepped out.

Soon after, the leaders-in-training program started. Then a mentoring program was set up so kids would have someone to turn to who understood their communities and the daily pressures on them.

18, the majority – roughly 60 per cent – had not been convicted of a criminal offence.

The highest-risk kids – about half in the program – have a much greater chance of success when they also meet with a mentor for an hour a week to help them apply SNAP strategies to their daily lives.

Of the children who attended nine or more of the 12 initial SNAP sessions, 36 per cent were found guilty of at least one crime by the time they reached 18. However, of those who attended eight sessions or fewer, 68 per cent had committed a crime.

In the U.S., the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has designated SNAP as an "Exemplary Program." A White House initiative known as Helping America's Youth gave it a Level 1 designation, its highest.

It recently received an award from the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth Mental Health in Ottawa and an outstanding achievement award in 2005 from the Child Welfare League of Canada.

For boys, the program is funded by the

Augimeri says Latchford is one of her best staff. Latchford says the kids know he understands. "I felt I had more to offer these kids, having been there and having been that way." At the Child Development Institute, three groups of 21 kids go through 12-week SNAP sessions every year. Parents take simultaneous sessions.

There's typically a seven-year incubation period between a child's first delinquent behaviour and when he is first picked up by police, Augimeri says. First criminal offences for young offenders peak at age 14, which means the trouble first starts as early as age 7.

"I worry that these are the forgotten kids," she says.

It costs the system about \$100,000 a year to keep one youth in a secure facility. It costs about \$1,000 to put him through a three-month SNAP program and \$4,000 for a kid who needs extra help, such as family counselling and tutoring.

Latchford says what made the difference was having people in charge who had high expectations of him and kids who relied on him.

"It had a lot to do with the fact they kept putting me in a role that was challenging for myself, and yet was helpful for others."

province. It relies on private donors for girls.

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