

PREVENTION ACTION

NEWS | RESEARCH | WHAT WORKS | COMMENT | **PEOPLE** | SPECIAL ISSUES | REVIEWS | BLOGS & FEEDS | EVENTS | REFERENCE | ABOUT

COMMENT | PRINT | EMAIL



▶ SIMILAR LINKS

- Turning Irish society toward child centeredness
- Ireland goes boldly on to the mountain
- One size fits all? Incredible!
- SPR 2011: Laying the parent trap
- US program rescues Irish kids from end of tether



Incredible journey for one Skinner pigeon!

25 January 2011

It was always going to be hard to surpass the achievements of an inventor father who provided civilization with something as ubiquitous and internationally dependable as the squeegee mop. But Len Webster's gifts to the world and to his daughter, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, also included practicality, lateral thinking and the painstaking quality control that now characterize her own classic example of useful design, *The Incredible Years*.

"I was in private practice for four years and I always wondered whether the counseling and therapy I provided was making any difference back in the child's home. Is all this talking stuff turning into change? Most parents get the idea that it's better to ignore misbehavior than to overreact. But we don't always do the things we get."

The first stab at finding out came in her doctoral work when she made use of new technology by giving parents earpieces through which she could give them "real time" coaching. The approach was effective but very time consuming. So that led her to put together a program. And the result has been [The Incredible Years](#).

"In a way, the work is a synthesis of my origins on the East Coast, where the psycho-dynamic was pervasive, and my life here on the West Coast where there is a tradition of behaviorism. In the late 1970s barricades separated the two approaches. But I didn't see it

like that. Of course we can learn effective behavioral strategies. But we have to recognize feelings and emotions.”

A major influence was Jerry Patterson and his studies of coercive parenting processes. At about the same time Albert Bandura's work demonstrated how children learn at least as much from *watching* their parents as from listening to them. Getting parents to model good behavior was the way to get it embedded.

Carolyn Webster-Stratton remains one of a too small group of leading prevention scientists who also work directly with children. A nurse and psychologist by training, clinical practice is at the heart of her life's work.

She trained as a pediatric nurse at Yale where she learned the central importance of relationships and attachment, and the value of play. At the time the idea of taming one's mind, of turning negative thoughts into positive ones also had a strong influence.

“I stood on the shoulders of giants. I took these ideas and placed them in the context of child development. Little children do not respond cognitively the same way as adolescents or adults. So I had to think how to develop the concepts in practice and across the lifespan.”

She produced the *Incredible Years* basic parenting program before she had children of her own. Afterwards she developed the advanced curriculum, which deals much more with the emotional aspects of bringing up children and teaches parents how to be emotional coaches.

“I had a head start as a parent. I knew strategies. I was in my mid-thirties. I was relatively well off. But it was still the hardest job I have done and with the least preparation. What if I had been younger, less well informed, poorer? What if I was trying to work out how to put food on the table? Where would I get the help I need to bring up my children, and respond to their emotional needs?”

The results are there for all to see. The impact of *The Incredible Years* has been demonstrated in several experimental trials. The program is in place in the US, England, Ireland, Norway, Australia and New Zealand. In Wales it is the bedrock of government early years prevention activity.

But Carolyn Webster-Stratton is tireless and the challenges are considerable. “Despite all the studies we don't seem to be able to get the program into the hands of clinicians in an efficient way.”

Maintaining fidelity to the model and stopping policy makers cutting corners is a constant battle. Too many fail to distinguish between a parenting program with an evidence base and another without.

“Preventing mental health problems is not a quick process. Giving families a bit of *Incredible Years* is not the same as properly implementing it. It's like baking a cake. You need all of the ingredients. People will have their own way of going about things but all the basic components have to be there and combined in roughly the right order. There may be some adaptations – for diabetics, for example, but there are no short cuts to a good cake. And so it is with parenting programs.”^s

LOGIN LEGAL INFO CONTACT US

In California better monitoring and quality control systems are being tested to get the best from *Incredible Years*. Much emphasis has been placed on helping senior policy makers and managers to understand the logic behind the program and the waste of implementing it poorly.

“I never had a strategy. I’m like a Skinner pigeon pecking away. Every now and then I get reinforced.”

Today’s rewards are coming from a new study looking at the impact of *The Incredible Years* on children with ADHD and other developmental impairments. “A lot of attention is paid to these children and their problems. But less thought is given to their parents, and their teachers. Bringing up these children is tough full-time work. I want to see if *Incredible Years* can help’.

► EXPLAINERS

BMP Incredible Years

The Incredible Years is an early intervention program that aims to improve family interaction and prevent early and persistent antisocial behavior in children aged three to 12.