

Dinosaur Program's Emphases on Visual and Behavioral Learning

Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

The Incredible Years Dinosaur Curriculum uses video modeling vignettes as one of its core learning methods for teaching children social, emotional and school readiness skills. Some teachers have responded, “ *Is it appropriate to use DVDs to teach students in the classroom? Children already watch too much television at home and the use of television in the classroom is a passive and a poor method of teaching.*”

Indeed it is true that children are not sent to school to sit passively in front of a television screen. They are sent to school to be actively and intellectually involved, to be encouraged to communicate their ideas and feelings with others, to learn how to interact socially, to regulate emotions, and to problem-solve. In the past two decades we have learned a great deal about how young children learn and how to enhance brain development so that our teaching methods can be more developmentally appropriate. Research has shown that it is important for teachers to be able to hold and attract children's attention for them to focus and remember what they are learning. We also have learned that young children are not very verbal and learn best from visual images, simple narrative stories, imaginary worlds and repetition of single ideas. Moreover, children learn best in an atmosphere where they have predictable rules and routines, are highly involved and feel a sense of self-worth.

A great deal has been learned about the effects of television on children's behavior because of the work of Bandura's modeling theory (A. Bandura, 1977; Albert Bandura, 1986). Unfortunately, the modeling children are usually exposed to on TV may be more negative and aggressive behavior than positive prosocial behavior. Parents need to monitor this exposure carefully. Other, more recent research conducted at the University of Washington by Christakis and Meltzoff indicated that for very young children, television actually can impede language development, perhaps because it lacks the important reciprocal interaction qualities present in face-to-face encounters.

The Dinosaur Curriculum has been researched as prevention programs delivered 2-3 times a week in preschool and early childhood classrooms with high risk populations as well as with small treatments groups of children diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder and Developmental Delays. In randomized control group studies this program has been shown to increase children's social skills, feelings literacy, problem solving and school readiness skills (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). In the Dinosaur School Curriculum teachers are taught how to use brief video vignette demonstrations of social interactions in an effective way that is engaging to children, interactive, visual, and promotes powerful learning. The use of visual video vignettes is great medium

for education if used as a trigger for discussion to involve students and to practice the positive social or self-regulatory behaviors being modeled. Video vignettes promote children's attention and increase learning if used in an effective way.

In the classroom version of the Dinosaur School Curriculum teachers show between 1-4 brief video vignettes in each circle time (number of vignettes varies by lesson and also by developmental ability of the children in the classroom). Each vignette is 1-3 minutes long and the majority of vignettes display children using positive coping and problem solving skills in order to provide positive models for children. A minority of the vignettes show children making poor choices so that participants can use problem solving skills to discuss and practice strategies for obtaining more positive outcomes.

The following are some of the key principles of effective use of the dinosaur curriculum vignettes. Teachers should:

- use vignettes to promote visual learning while avoiding too much emphasis on verbal learning
- pause a single vignette several times to determine what children are seeing and feeling; this promotes feeling language and meaningful understanding; moreover, pausing gives children time to think about what they are seeing and respond, promoting active verbal participation
- pause a single vignette to ask children what they think will happen next; this promotes storytelling, involvement, and empathy for characters in vignettes.
- show a vignette more than once: repetition is key to learning as it allows children to rehearse and practice what they are learning, leading to better memory and understanding of the idea
- use vignettes to trigger behavioral practice of skills by acting out stories using the ideas children have generated
- use a vignette to prompt further discussion and practice between children and puppets, or to tell a story related to the key idea or express feelings; this promotes children's engagement with the learning and involvement because of the fantasy and imaginary element of their thinking
- focus on one or two simple ideas (e.g., sharing or 2 feeling words) following each vignette; don't add too much complexity
- use the laminated visual cue cards with the video vignettes to highlight key learning idea
- set up movement activities following each vignette to enhance learning

Remember children will be more engaged in watching and learning from the video vignettes if the experience is memorable, meaningful, interactive and intellectually and behaviorally active.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Webster-Stratton, C., & Reid, M. J. (2010). [The Incredible Years Parents, Teachers and Children Training Series: A multifaceted treatment approach for young children with conduct problems](#). In J. Weisz & A. Kazdin (Eds.), *Evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents, 2nd edition*. New York: Guilford Publications.