

The Power of a Peacemaker



Through her research, OSU-Tulsa professor Dr. Amanda Morris is helping about 60 families from two Boys and Girls Clubs of Tulsa learn how to manage emotions and resolve conflicts in a nonviolent manner.

Whether it's bullying, teasing, jealousy, sibling disputes or playground fights, many young people are caught up in conflicts every day and they don't know how to handle them.

Dr. Amanda Morris, associate professor of human development and family science at OSU-Tulsa, is working to provide youth with the knowledge and skills they need to resolve conflicts in a nonviolent manner.

With funding to support the study from the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, Morris and her team of trained OSU researchers, graduate assistants and students from Tulsa and Stillwater are trying to make a difference by promoting resilient and healthy family behaviors.

"One of my passions is to help at-risk youth and families through my research projects and related outreach," Morris said. "Helping early adolescents learn how to manage emotions and handle conflict is one the best ways to reach this goal and we are seeing a lot of success."

Morris said the objective of her research is to assist Tulsa-area parents and youth (ages eight to 12) who are at an increased risk for community violence, economic distress and difficulties in effective parenting and family interaction. Learning how they cope with emotions and conflict can give parents, teachers and other community members the insight they need to promote and encourage peaceful conflict resolution and improve conditions in their homes, schools and community.

The Facts

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the U.S. Department of Justice, conflict resolution education can help bring about significant reductions in suspensions, disciplinary referrals, academic disruptions, school fights and family and sibling disputes. By providing young people with the knowledge and skills needed to settle disputes peacefully, they can successfully prevent conflicts from escalating into violent acts.

Working with about 60 families from two Boys and Girls Clubs of Tulsa, Morris and her team are evaluating several factors before and after participation in a conflict resolution intervention program.

The program, "I Can Problem Solve," was developed by Dr. Myrna Shure, a developmental psychologist and professor of psychology at Drexel University. The adapted 10-week intervention program aims to strengthen parent-child communication and conflict-resolution skills by teaching perspective-taking, effective communication, problem-solving and means-end thinking.

"Many young people turn to gangs, drugs and violence to make them feel better about themselves," Morris said. "We want to teach kids positive ways to handle emotions and related stress. We want to reach youth early in adolescence before negative influences and destructive coping patterns set in."

Morris' research findings during an earlier study at the same Boys and Girls Clubs of Tulsa in 2006 suggested the need for conflict-resolution programs. The results indicated that those children were being exposed to moderate to high levels of violence in their neighborhood. Sixty-two percent of the children reported hearing gun shots; 48 percent reported seeing drug deals; 74 percent reported seeing someone being beaten up; 16 percent reported seeing someone get stabbed; and 23 percent reported seeing someone get shot.

"Violence in communities is a pervasive contextual factor in child and adolescent development," Morris said. "Youth exposed to high family and peer conflict may see this type of family interaction as an appropriate way to deal with conflict, increasing the risk for destructive interaction within families and communities."

Promising Results

The 2006 research study was Morris' first as a professor at OSU-Tulsa. Since her initial findings, she has worked continually to get funding and the appropriate approvals to put the "I Can Problem Solve" intervention program in place.

Though Morris is still collecting data for her current study, she is already seeing promising results.

"What we're finding so far is that their responses to conflict are becoming much more positive after the intervention," Morris said. "The program really seems to be making a difference."

OSU-Tulsa President Gary Trennepohl said Morris' research and work with Tulsa's youth are great examples of the many OSU professors and students who are impacting communities through their academic efforts and research expertise.

"University-community partnerships are exciting and beneficial for everyone involved. Our faculty and students have the opportunity to apply their research skills and knowledge to a real-world problem and assist local organizations with their goal of improving the quality of life for individuals and families in the community," Trennepohl said. "OSU-Tulsa will continue to focus on conducting research that is relevant and beneficial to the needs of our community."

Morris hopes to broaden her research intervention project across Oklahoma, as well as collect similar data in other parts of the world. She is conducting related research in Kenya that involves families living in extremely violent, high-risk environments with no running water or electricity.

She and her colleagues at OSU are also in the early stages of creating the Center for Family Risk and Resilience through the Department of Human Development and Family Science at OSU-Tulsa. The Center will partner OSU researchers with local social service agencies to tackle problems and find solutions for issues in the community.

Morris admits that although the focus of her research is difficult at times, she loves working with young people and looks forward to a career of seeing them succeed.

"I've always wanted to do this. I've just always wanted to help families," Morris said.

Trish McBeath