

Merced County Using PEI Funds to Care for Its Kids



By Christina Call

By the age of five, ninety-five percent of a child's brain has already developed. How one thinks, processes information, identifies with other people, and interacts with people has all been developed at this early point. Children who don't learn social skills at an age appropriate time are at an increased risk for future failures, especially in school. In fact, 50% of children who start showing behavioral problems in preschool continue to show problems during their school years (*Campbell, 1995*) and children who display problem behaviors at an early age are most likely to develop serious antisocial problems in adolescence and adulthood (*Webster-Stratton, 1997*). "If you're doing true prevention work, you want to make sure that if a trauma occurs, a mental health issue will not occur...work has to be done really early, before seven or eight," according to Senior Project Manager of Resource Development Associates, Kayce Garcia-Rane. Garcia-Rane and Caring Kids Project Manager and Behavior Support Specialist, Monica Adrian, explained that this is just some of the re-

search behind the formation of a mental health prevention program in Merced County called Caring Kids.

Caring Kids promotes the healthy social and emotional development of young children, according to Adrian. The program does this in many ways including teaching social skills directly to children as well as providing training and support to parents and childcare providers. Children in "at risk" preschool settings are taught in small groups once a week about appropriate social skills. They are taught things such as the importance of rules, sharing, understanding differences, and how to deal with anger.

Caring Kids reaches out to parents through either group workshops or to individuals in their own home. The group workshops are usually conducted in preschools throughout Merced. For teenage mothers, monthly training sessions are available at their high school. These workshops and training sessions cover strategies for effective behavior management and techniques for creating a healthy environment that promotes social and emotional development in their child. For parents who do not speak English, training is conducted in their primary language by a trainer who is also familiar with their cultural practices.

The program has been receiving some funds from First 5 Merced County and has been approved for \$160,000 annually in MHSA Prevention and Early Intervention funds. In addition, the program is receiving a one-time amount of \$25,000 in PEI funds for start up costs. These costs include the recruiting and training of new staff. The annual \$160,000 of MHSA funds will be used to expand the program to reach 300 children a year as well as provide more intensive services for those that qualify. When deciding in what pro-

grams Merced County should invest its PEI money, participants in the PEI planning process expressed a desire to prioritize services for children and youth who were in stressful family situations and children who were at risk of school failure. Participants also stressed the value of using resources that already existed. Caring Kids is such an existing program. It uses an evidence-based best practices model that is similar to programs in other counties that have been evaluated thoroughly. It also has a history of success in Merced.

"We have seen that about 70% of the children who participate no longer score as having high levels of problem behaviors and/or low social skills," said Adrian. "A typical success story involves a preschool calling us to let us know that they have tried all they could to try to manage a child's behavior and that they are on the verge of expelling a child and we come in and provide training and support which makes it possible for the child to remain in preschool," said Adrian.

Caring Kids provides children expressing behavioral problems a second chance. Because Caring Kids focuses on addressing problems at an early age, children can avoid problems later in school and in their adult lives. This is what makes Caring Kids such a successful and innovative program.



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