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Turtles teach social skills in Norwood

Local preschools get involved in national program

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Want to know how to think like a turtle? Ask any preschool child in Norwood. Prime Time Early Learning Center (PTELC) preschool and Norwood School preschool teachers are teaming up and tucking like turtles. They're not hiding in the sand, but they are teaching young kids how to cope with anger and frustration.

Tucker Turtle is the newest part of a larger, ongoing curriculum to help kids in Norwood's early childhood programs become competent in their social and emotional lives. Tucker and his corresponding curriculum come from The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL), a nation-wide program based out of Vanderbilt University in Tenn.

CSEFEL's mission is "to promote the social emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age five." The program's Web site, www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel, offers free tutorials and materials for parents, states, coaches, and teachers and caregivers. Colorado Department of Education is working in partnership with CSEFEL to implement its programming in preschools state-wide.

Tucker Turtle "takes time to tuck and think," teachers remind the children at Wrights Mesa Center, where the preschool programs are housed. They say it, post reminders on bulletin boards around the classrooms and center hallways, and practice tucking techniques at circle time. There is even a turtle step-stool outside the bathrooms, and a chair in the main hallway is placed next to a table stacked with Tucker literature for parents and children alike. A plush turtle puppet gives the kids demonstrations of how a turtle tucks whenever it is necessary.

The postings and practice sessions help the kids learn to "think like a turtle when they're mad or frustrated," said Robin Snyder, the NPS preschool teacher. First they "tuck in," keeping their bodies to themselves. Then, they count to three while taking deep breaths. Finally, they think of a solution and propose it to their friends.

The preschool classrooms have solution kits to help the kids think of ways to solve the problems. The kits include an hourglass (five-minute glass, actually) and a ring full of cards that show solutions like share, take turns, or do something else.

The infant and toddler rooms have even come on board and have painted turtles on the special pillows the little ones go to when they're having a hard time socially or emotionally.

"Tucker provides more visual reminders for the kids," said Snyder. Both she and Kristen Parrino, Prime Time's preschool teacher, recently attended a state seminar in teaching with CSEFEL techniques. "We're hoping to get this implemented center-wide," said Snyder, referring to the six-week old to 12-year old programs offered by Prime Time, as well as the preschool programs at the center.

Norwood has created an "Early Childhood Leadership Team" to help get CSEFEL techniques in place. Both Snyder and Parrino are on the team, as well as PTELC toddler teacher Sharon Perry, NPS superintendent David Crews, Sharon Davarn and Jessica Burress from Uncompaghre Board of Cooperative Services (UnBOCS), Wright Stuff Community Foundation CEO Andrya Brantingham, Prime Time director Heather Montonati, and UnBOCS staff Johanna Wasser and Virginia Kile who are CSEFEL coaches. Together, the team is working on educating local staff as well as area superintendents, UnBOCS representatives, and parents.

"Positive Family Support" parent training will be offered in the spring, said Snyder, but in the meantime, parents and others interested can contact Snyder, Parrino, or any team member to get more information. They can also visit the CSEFEL Web site any time.

The great part of this program is that "it makes our job easier," said Snyder. Teaching the kids how to handle social and emotional stress on their own gives them some independence. And, said Parrino, "We're able to engage with the kids rather than simply monitor their behavior."

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