

## Building Oconto County children's critical thinking skills for 21<sup>st</sup> century success

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**“The program definitely got me to think about...how to raise a child that will succeed in life.”**

**-Participant comment**

Wisconsin's prosperity is rooted in the problem-solving skill and innovation of its residents. Children with the ability to think clearly and critically are the foundation of a productive and responsible next generation of employees, parents and community members.

Using blueprints based on science and practice, skills like critical thinking, impulse control, problem-solving and conflict resolution can be taught early in life. Young children's most influential teachers are their parents. Parenting programs that build these capacities in young children set the stage for preventing later serious problems like juvenile delinquency, school problems, and alcohol and drug use.



### Family Living Programs responds

A Cooperative Extension Family Living work group sought out the most effective “brain-building” programs for parents to use with their young children. The group reviewed

programs from around the world that were potentially a good fit for Wisconsin families, and selected the evidence-based *Raising a Thinking Child* program from Drexel University.

Studies of *Raising a Thinking Child* show that training mothers of four-year-olds to teach problem-solving skills to their children at home can result in better child behavior. Children in these studies were better able to wait for what they wanted (impulse control); better able to share and take turns; and less easily upset in frustrating situations. The most withdrawn children became more socially outgoing, better able to stand up for themselves and less fearful of social situations.

And the children trained by their mothers to use problem-solving thinking and conflict resolution at home also used it at school. This is likely because *Raising a Thinking Child* trains parents to teach their children *how* to think—not *what* to think.

Further study results have shown that children are not the only ones to benefit. Mothers in the *Raising a Thinking Child* program improved their ability to solve child-based problems. Mothers learned to think through problems their children might encounter. As a result, they were better able to guide their children to think for themselves when real problems arose. These increases in “mother outcomes” appear to positively affect child problem-solving skills and behaviors.

To bring the benefits of *Raising a Thinking Child* to Wisconsin families, Family Living educators and specialists:

- Updated and adapted *Raising a Thinking Child* for Wisconsin and made it available to parents of young children in the state.

- Conducted six statewide trainings that instructed over 80 family professionals how to teach the program, including staff from family resource centers, Head Start, pre-K and elementary schools, child care centers, public health and social services.
- Secured partners to promote, fund and teach the program.
- Translated the materials for use by Spanish-speaking parents and families.
- Created a public website at <http://fyi.uwex.edu/rtcprogram/>

### Results

In Oconto County, Barb Truttman, Parent Resource Center Educator, taught *Raising a Thinking Child* 6 times between 2008-2012, with 42 parents completing the series, all reporting positive feedback when surveyed.

- Every parent who participated in Raising a Thinking Child said their child's behavior had changed since taking the program. Parents described their children as more calm, more aware of others feelings, able to think of consequences, less frustrated and more cooperative.
- Parents not only increased their knowledge and skills (pretest skills 2.2 compared with 4.0 upon completion of class), but they used these new skills to teach their children to evaluate solutions and alternatives. For example, parents reported less yelling, staying calm and listening more to their children.
- Children showed increases in problem-solving abilities and anticipating the consequences of their actions; better awareness of appropriate times to act; and better coping skills when they didn't get their way (pretest showed children skills at 2.2 with post session rating of 3.7).
- Elementary schools and Public Libraries collaborated with Family Living educators on providing the series.

### Oconto County Participants in the *Raising a Thinking Child* program said:

"I find myself being more patient and asking more "thinking questions" which helps me recognize how my reactions affect my child."

"This program helped me understand my child's feelings, and helped him to relate to others feelings."

"I let my child think of solutions and ideas to life issues, instead of deciding for him what he should do."

"I would suggest it to other parents. This class brought me to a new level in parenting."

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Participants in *Raising a Thinking Child* programs changed their parenting in ways that helped build their children's problem-solving and critical thinking skills. By bringing *Raising a Thinking Child* to Wisconsin, Family Living Programs is providing a resource that can serve as an asset to children throughout their lives and helping to build a responsible next generation.

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