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Help for troubled kids

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IT MIGHT be a toddler who bites or a child who throws chairs. They are children in preschool programs with serious behavior problems. And when their actions become too disruptive they are expelled.

“Kids don't grow out of this. They get worse,” says Carole Upshur, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

That can set up a cascade of failures that stretches through children's early and later school years, marking them as troubled kids, troublemakers, or failures.

There is a solution: early intervention. It's the work being done by the Together for Kids Coalition in Worcester. Running in five pilot child-care sites since 2002, the program screens children for “clinically significant” problems. The next step is a team approach: services and resources for children, parents, teachers, and staff. The program has also collected data to measure outcomes.

The results: Roughly 34 percent of children in this study were found to have behavioral problems. But those who received a modest amount of services, some 30 hours over several months, showed considerable progress. They were less aggressive, better at coping, and better behaved at home. Parents received help and said that their children's listening and learning skills improved.

A key ingredient is building a relationship with parents, says Linda Granville, the director of Child Care Services at the YWCA of Central Massachusetts. Before using Together for Kids, the Y had expelled seven children. Since using it, the program hasn't had expulsions. And training has given the staff new, effective ways to manage problems before they become disasters, creating lasting change for the Y itself and cutting down on staff turnover.

How can all families who need these services get them? By expanding Together for Kids and other strong models. The state's new Department of Early Education and Care is working on this. It has pilot sites. And the department has just put out a call for proposals to provide mental-health training and consultation for staff and teachers. A Senate budget proposal would earmark \$1.4 million of existing funds for mental-health services -- a reasonable move.

But the state must move beyond pilots. Families should be able to take it for granted that preschool programs will have first-class mental-health services with easy access to mental-health professionals, training for staff and teachers, and, most important, early assessments of children's needs. It should be part of a vastly improved, comprehensive mental-health system for children.

The promise is powerful: potentially saving children from years of behavioral and mental-health problems so that they can focus on their own success. ■

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