



Problem teens need lesson in social skills

In a society where medication is commonly used as a quick-fix for childhood behaviour problems, a group of Sydney researchers is taking a different tack.

A team of speech pathologists, psychologists and teachers is looking at whether teaching communication and social skills can help turn around the lives of troubled young people.

The results of a small pilot study have been promising, says Sydney University speech pathologist Karen James.

"I was expecting some change but nowhere near the results we got," she says.

James and colleagues focused on a group of 42 teenagers aged 12 to 16 at Plumpton House, a school for students with severe behavioural problems in Western Sydney.

After a 12-week course designed to teach basic social skills, seven of the teens were able to return to mainstream education.

The program also helped decrease truancy rates, improve language skills and increase literacy scores.

Throughout weekly hour-long social skills lessons and one-on-one speech pathology sessions students were taught to read body language, recognise different emotions in other people and how to talk to people of different levels of authority.

Researchers used clips from the video sharing website *YouTube* and scenes from movies to help students "read" human interaction and understand appropriate behaviour.

"Social skills was one of the big problems they had," says James.

"The kids don't wait their turn they didn't know how to ask for help. They are impulsive, they don't know what tone of voice to use with a teacher as opposed to with a friend.

"By focusing on language and basic social skills like interpreting body language, considering the consequences of your actions

or even waiting your turn, we were able to address the causes of some more basic behavioural problems students had.

"A typical classroom teacher stands at the front of the room and talks to the kids.

"If you have got someone that has language issues, or even behaviour problems, they can't sit and concentrate and listen, they hear one of out of the four things that they have to do."

Plumpton school counsellor Leanne Neville, who initiated the scheme, says communication skills are a key factor in getting difficult kids back into the mainstream and keeping them there.

"Research shows us that language is an important piece of the puzzle, it is vital that we address these core needs of our students if they are going to re-enter mainstream schools with the skills and abilities they need to stay there," she says.

Dealing with difficult kids

- Look at body language, don't just listen to the words.
- Make activities relevant. If a teenager sees how an activity can benefit them personally they will be more likely to join in.
- Don't force active participation. Kids can also

- learn a lot from watching
- Look for the missing skill behind the behaviour. For example, if a young person is always in trouble it may be that they are unable to understand what is being said, which could indicate a language problem.