



# Getting kids back on track

**A group of researchers has found improving the social and communication skills of troubled teens, is helping them turn their lives around, writes Chi Tranter**

**I**N 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 focussed 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

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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.

Helen McGrath, a behaviour expert from Deakin University who wasn't involved in the research, agrees that teaching problem teens social skills is a step in the right direction. "Troubled young people do lack the kind of social skills that allow them to get involved in positive relationships and they sometimes find themselves a bit isolated," she says.

"I am sure it wouldn't work with all young people.

"But I am confident from the research that it would work with a significant number of them."

Part of the reason some teens act up at school is because they are overwhelmed, James says.

"One of the biggest things is to keep instructions very specific and very short," she says.

"Kids with language problems need things spelled out to them."

However, she said programs like the one trialed at Plumpton House would never replace the need for medication in appropriate cases.

"This was just one thing . . . to support these kids," she says.

**AAP**



**NATURAL REMEDY:** A Sydney study which focuses on improving social skills, rather than resorting to medication, has been helping troubled teens return to mainstream education.

## Dealing with difficult kids

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