



Preschoolers at St. Anthony's YMCA Child Development Center in Portland help Dina the Dinosaur teach the puppet Molly how to behave in school and get along with others. By participating in the lesson, the students learn the same skills, better preparing them for academic success. Cate Drinan, an early childhood consultant from Morrison Child and Family Services, directs the session.

BOB ELLIS
THE OREGONIAN

'Dinosaur' teaches kids new tricks

"Dina" and "Molly" act out situations so Portland preschoolers can learn to cooperate and follow rules

By **SUZANNE PARDINGTON**
THE OREGONIAN

Sitting still when you're feeling wiggly. Waiting your turn to speak. Feeling mad but not knowing the words to explain why. These are the frustrations of preschool.

Dealing with them in a way that doesn't lead to a meltdown is crucial to academic and social success in preschool and beyond.

That's where Dina, a blue and green

polka-dot dinosaur with bubble eyes, and Molly, a child-sized puppet with yellow-yarn hair, come in.

Dina, the principal of Dinosaur School, and Molly, her student, are teaching children in several Portland preschools and child care centers the social, emotional and behavioral skills they need to do well in school.

"All children can benefit from learning those skills; some children need it more," said Dinosaur School's developer, Caro-

lyn Webster-Stratton, professor and director of The Parenting Clinic at the University of Washington.

Numerous studies show early aggression and social and emotional problems in young children place them at higher risk for developing anti-social behavior, such as substance abuse, dropping out of school and violence in adolescence, Webster-Stratton said.

Early childhood is often the easiest time to intervene, she said, because that's

when brains and behavior patterns are rapidly developing.

But all too often, preschoolers don't get the help they need. Instead, they are expelled.

A study last year by Walter S. Gilliam of the Yale University Child Study Center found that the pre-kindergarten expulsion rate was more than three times higher than that of older students. Expulsion is less likely when mental health

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Puppets:

Expert praises an unusual tool for teaching

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consultants work with teachers, he found.

"We're not here to be baby sitters," said Sheri Helvey, director of St. Anthony's YMCA Child Development Center in Southeast Portland. "We're here to do everything we can to help these kids."

Puppets are a powerful teaching tool because children relate to them and feel comfortable talking to them, Webster-Stratton said. Children between the ages of 3 and 8 have a rich imaginary world, and using puppets is a way of entering their world, she said.

Each puppet has its own personality that mirrors a child's feelings. The children at St. Anthony's often talk about the puppets as if they are real.

Molly is shy, sensitive and doesn't like loud noises or being touched. Like a lot of the other kids, she keeps forgetting to raise her hand and sometimes finds it hard to wait her turn.

Wally, Molly's older brother, is impulsive, loud and has trouble physically controlling himself. Dina is a wise, 1,000-year-old dinosaur who acts as a gentle authority.

Through them, the children learn words to express their feelings and how to see others' perspectives, solve problems, make friends and do their best in school. The children, in turn, can practice their skills by teaching them to the puppets.

In one of Molly's first lessons, for instance, she blurted an answer out of turn.

"Can you guys show Molly how to raise a quiet hand?" asked puppeteer Cate Drinan.

Several children raised their hands, and Drinan praised those who waited patiently to be called on. By the end of class, Molly felt more confident.

"You guys are really nice," she said. "I feel better now."

Early intervention

Drinan is one of six early childhood consultants from Morrison Child and Family Services who work with children, parents and teachers in 10 Portland preschools and child care centers and five networks of home providers, most serving diverse, low-income areas.

The Morrison consultants use the puppets to work with preschoolers at seven sites in full classes, small groups and one on one. They also offer classes to teach parents skills to improve their children's behavior, using Webster-Stratton's The Incredible Years parenting program.

"That way, the kids are hearing it in stereo," Drinan said.

Their work is paid for with a \$1.3 million grant over five years from the Portland Children's Investment Fund, supported with a five-year property tax that Portland voters approved in 2002. The grant runs out in 2008.

The consultants identify and refer children with severe mental health and developmental problems to other early intervention programs. But few resources are available for children with milder issues that might become worse.

Those are the children Morrison consultants aim most to help.

Lessons learned

Six-year-old Alaina Smith, now a kindergartner at Vestal Elementary in Northeast Portland, struggled in preschool to express how she felt, focus her energy and follow directions. If she didn't feel like participating in an activity, she wouldn't, said her mother, Judy Smith.

Drinan and the Dinosaur

School puppets taught her words for her emotions. Alaina also gained more social and problem-solving skills at St. Anthony's, making it easier for her to interact with other children.

Drinan recalls helping Alaina and another girl resolve a dispute over a toy by using phrases such as, "Can I please have that back?" and "When you're done, can I have a turn?" Drinan came back 15 minutes later and both girls were playing happily with the toy.

"It really drastically changed what could have been the outcome of that scenario," Drinan said.

When Molly wasn't called on in a recent Dinosaur School lesson, Dina and the children taught her to say, "Darn, maybe next time," instead of getting upset.

Four-year-old Jensen Ervin used that technique on a summer camping trip, his mom, Sonja Ervin, said. When a music performance was delayed at a campsite amphitheater, they decided not wait.

A park ranger asked Jensen whether they were leaving because the performance took too long to start.

"Yeah, but maybe next time," Jensen replied.

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