Project IRIS looks for ways to prevent mental illness in children

Thirdhand violence that has dominated headlines in Kentucky and elsewhere in the country over the last months has made parents and educators more concerned about the mental well being of children.

At four Kentucky schools, a process aimed at preventing mental health problems among children is taking shape and should be able to offer other schools and communities some preventive ideas in a few years.

The Integrated Resources In Schools initiative, or IRIS, is a five-year federal grant project that began in 1995.

Kentucky was one of five states awarded money to come up with ways to help young people avoid mental health problems.

The $150,000-a-year grant was awarded to the Department for Public Health which shares the implementation with the Department for Public Health, Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services, among other agencies.

Kentucky's IRIS project is based at four schools: Blaine Elementary in Lawrence County; Liberty Elementary in Casey County; Faust Elementary in Owensboro and Parkway Elementary in Rudolff.

IRIS brings families, schools and local service agencies together to determine what the children's needs are and see how they are met.

For example, residents of Blaine said one of their chief needs is primary medical care.

As a result, the Three Rivers Medical Center in Louisa is working to bring a clinic to Blaine, about 25 miles away.

Sonnie Hamilton, the IRIS coordinator at Blaine, said physical problems affect a person's mental health, particularly school-aged children.

Hamilton is also working with Blaine residents to dispel the stigma attached to mental illness.

"Just like physical problems, it's nothing to be ashamed of," Hamilton said.

"I think slowly but surely it's starting to make a difference."

At Liberty Elementary, IRIS is helping to focus on screening of pre-school children as they prepare for kindergarten.

Teachers are made aware of any behavior or learning problems so they can be dealt with early.

"Learning should not be a problem," said Sue Goode, a kindergarten teacher at Liberty Elementary.

"We're trying to make it as comfortable as possible."

In Owensboro, IRIS is helping the Faust Elementary community survey its needs and strengths.

And at Parkway Elementary in Rudolff, IRIS is helping look for ways to offer more after-school activities to students and to expand a program that helps parents nurture and stimulate their young children.

According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, studies show that one in five children may have behavioral, emotional, or mental health problems.

These problems, if ignored, can lead to school failure, alcohol or drug abuse, family discord, violence or suicide.

David Mawn, the IRIS coordinator for the state, said the idea behind IRIS is to make sure children have a nurturing environment "so when they're adults they are emotionally and mentally ready and adjusted. Instead of waiting for problems to develop, we try to prevent them."

Radon reduction system contractors should meet EPA mitigation standards

Homeowners who are choosing a contractor to install a radon reduction system should hire companies that have gone through Environmental Protection Agency training and follow EPA radon mitigation standards, warns Kentucky public health officials.

Some radon mitigators in Kentucky have not been following EPA standards that reduce the chance of radon reentering a home, said Doug Jackson with the Department for Public Health's Radon Program.

As a result, homeowners may think they have reduced a high level of radon and not be aware that the problem has not been corrected.

Some procedures that are not being followed include not extending the piping system beyond the eaves of the roof, not keeping the exit pipe at least 10 feet away from windows, doors and other points of entry, and placing fans in living areas or in garages below living areas.

To ensure that a radon mitigator you are considering hiring is following EPA standards, Jackson recommends the following:

•Use contractors who are EPA listed, meaning he has been through EPA training courses, passed an exam and pays a yearly fee. If an EPA listed contractor is not available in your area, there may be a contractor who has been through the training but is no longer listed. If you use a delisted contractor, verify his training by asking to see his certificate.

•If you are using an out-of-state contractor, ask about certification. Some neighboring states have a state certification program that oversees training and testing.

•Ask the contractor for documentation that he has been EPA listed or certified.

•Check out the contractor with the Better Business Bureau, ask for references and read the contract.

•Make sure the contract contains the stipulation that the firm will follow EPA radon mitigation standards.

Radon is a radioactive gas occurring naturally from the breakdown of underground uranium.

In outdoor air, it is diluted and usually becomes harmless.

However, when the colorless, odorless gas is trapped inside a building, it becomes hazardous.

Scientists estimate that between 7,000 and 30,000 lung cancer deaths a year in the United States may be attributed to radon exposure.

Nearly one out of every 15 homes in the United States is estimated to have elevated annual average levels of indoor radon.

Homeowners can test their homes for radon with a radon detector that can be bought at discount and hardware stores.

For more information about radon, contact Jackson at (502) 564-4856.

The star-nosed mole has 22 pink, fleshy "feelers" at the end of its snout. These growths are used to find the insects and worms it feeds on.

We Are Wondering How Old This Little Beauty Will Be On May 22!
Happy Birthday Anyway, Becky!
Nicholas County Headstart Staff

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- High red blood cell count

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