

Curriculum Showcase 2002

American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences
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Parenting Education Program in Schools

4½ hour curriculum for high school students

child abuse, parent-child relations, communication, and resilience

As a 20-year-old program delivered annually to up to 7000 students across several school districts, PEPS provided teens with practical information about child abuse and parenting. During the same period (1980 to 2000), research in the family field produced a rich body of knowledge about resilience.

In 2001, The Parenting Center updated the curriculum to not only reflect the new field of resilience but also to incorporate active learning techniques to enhance adolescents' understanding of family dynamics, abuse and, of course, resilience.

Dr. Mary Bold worked with the Center to create new curriculum elements as well as to update many of the successful activities already in PEPS. A volunteer PEPS Educator for more than a decade, Dr. Bold continues to work with The Parenting Center to develop training and support for the volunteers and staff members who deliver this curriculum.

Inside: directions for *Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around*



The PEPS curriculum is published by The Parenting Center and coordinated in two large metropolitan school districts. For program information, contact Sherry Dunn LMSW-ACP, CCM Director of Programs, sdunn@TheParentingCenter.org
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Parenting Education Program in Schools

Curriculum Modules and Topics

— this program is typically delivered over 3 days —

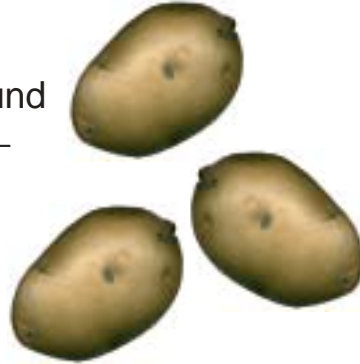
| Module | Topics | Materials / Props |
|---|---|--|
| Module 1 Create a Family | Family Composition TV Family Types Images of Family | 5 transparencies name tents, name tags wallet cards colored strings |
| Module 2 A Starbucks Romance | Family Dynamic Step-sibs' Negotiation Discipline in Blended Families | 1 transparency 7 name cards for roles |
| Module 3 Tossing Anxiety Around | Family Dynamic Family Communication Anxiety | 3 transparencies 12 "hot" potatoes |
| Module 4 Abuse / Sexual Abuse | Child Abuse Sexual Abuse | 7 transparencies video [optional] |
| Module 5 Aftermath / the cookie | What Happens Next (after telling a secret) | 1 transparency |
| Module 6 Change | Nodal Events Road to Change | 2 transparencies |
| Module 7 Emotional Abuse | Emotional Abuse Preschool View of the World Forms of Abuse Nurturance Infant Brain Research (Shaken Baby Syndrome) | 5 transparencies |
| Module 8 Emotional Reaction | Amygdala Reacting Times | 2 transparencies |
| Module 9 Resilience | Resilience [Review + Test] [Evaluation] | 3 transparencies bingo cards dry erase markers [copies of test] [copies of evaluation] |

PEPS

Parenting Education Program in Schools

Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

— makes anxiety “concrete” for discussion —



Brief Description: Facilitator and audience pass artificial hot potatoes around the room to simulate how anxiety travels through a group or family.

Objectives:

1. To develop understanding of anxiety.
2. To use kinesthetic activity to aid in the learning of this concept.
3. To include audience members in the creation of learning situation.
4. To increase vocabulary to use to name feelings.
5. To stimulate discussion about anxiety.
6. To introduce strategies to lower anxiety.

Materials Needed: About a dozen artificial potatoes (about \$1.85 each at hobby stores). Recommended for youth audiences: substitute with “potatoes” cut from foam and colored with brown acrylic paint.

Group Size: Any size group.
A dozen potatoes can accommodate up to about 40 people.
For auditorium-size group, increase number of potatoes and use assistants to start the circulation of potatoes at multiple sites.

Time Required: Introduction only: Ten minutes.
Discussion time that follows will vary depending on the group.

Strategies to Handle Anxiety: Additional ten minutes.
Discussion time that follows will vary depending on the group.

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Parenting Education Program in Schools



Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Rationale:

Anxiety is an abstract concept that can be externalized with the use of “hot potatoes,” a common colloquial term for situations or issues that typically represent high anxiety for the people involved in them. For adolescent audiences, especially, the use of physical objects to represent anxiety is a means to make the concept concrete.

Using the term “anxiety,” the audience is encouraged to specify what word is really appropriate for a particular feeling state. For example, many adolescents label their or their families’ emotional states as angry, mean, or hateful. Sometimes those words may be accurate, but most of the time, “anxious” is a better term, and one that does not promote angry response or retaliation. This exercise encourages people to recognize anxiety for what it is.

Passing hot potatoes through the group is demonstration of how anxiety travels through a group. Reference can be made to anxiety spreading through a herd of animals, through a family system, through a high school, and so forth. In some settings, such as the workplace or school classroom, the audience can be asked to provide examples of when anxiety has spread quickly among hundreds of people.

The activity provides a memory hook for “handling anxiety.”

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Parenting Education Program in Schools



Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Procedures:

1. Make potatoes obvious to stimulate interest before starting.
2. Distribute the potatoes along an aisle of the audience, explaining that the props are burning hot and that they represent “anxiety.”
3. Tell the audience to “get rid of those hot potatoes.” Encourage passing around the room until everyone has held the potato at least a couple of times.
4. Increase the excitement / anxiety by hurrying the group. “Watch out, there’s more coming your way. Hurry! They’re getting faster and faster! Get ready to get rid of it!”
5. If using foam potatoes, do not be concerned if the group starts “throwing” the audience. If hard potatoes are used (artificial or real vegetables) advise the group to “hand-off” the anxiety without tossing anything.
5. Explain some basic ideas about how anxiety ripples through a group. Depending on the setting and time restraints, offer suggestions for handling anxiety, such as: (1) refraining from reaction until the anxiety-provoking stimulus no longer affects the amygdala (may take 3 to 6 seconds), (2) calming oneself before picking up or passing along a potato (may take 4 to 10 minutes), (3) assisting the entire group in lowering the group anxiety (may take 8 to 16 minutes).

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Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Strategies to Handle Anxiety: Specific strategies can be taught and practiced. Role play is recommended to cement the sequence as presented here.

1 – Calm Your Own Brain. In the limbic area of your brain, where emotions rule, there is a structure called the amygdala. It is not very large, but it is very powerful. It is where you recognize an incoming emotion (anxiety-producing remark like “Don’t be stupid”) and give an immediate response (your own anxiety-producing remark like “You’re the stupid one”). This response is fast and automatic—you may feel as though you have no control over the words that fly out of your mouth. In fact, you can control your response and thereby control the entire exchange. But to control the amygdala, you must work another part of your brain for 3 to 6 seconds so that the amygdala cannot direct your words. “Counting to 10” is an example except that for many people that is so easy, or such a habit, that it doesn’t work. Use something tougher: think of the names of states surrounding the state you live in. Or a list of state capitals. Or spell Mississippi backwards. Any mental task that takes up to 6 seconds will do. (Once you memorize your task, though, it will be too easy for your brain and you will need to start using another distraction. In 3 to 6 seconds, your amygdala loses its power. You will have more choice about what words you respond with. But the anxiety will still be there.

2 – Calm Yourself. You will next have to find a way to settle yourself down. If you do not act on the anxiety, it will dissipate or at least be lowered. If you can soothe yourself for 4 to 10 minutes, you will begin to feel the anxiety lessen. Tension will drop and you may even be able to relax. How do you calm yourself? Some people use self-talk (“OK, I can get through this. In a few minutes I will be able to think straight. I don’t want to get into a fight and I know I can settle down.”) and others use imagery (“I see myself in a beautiful place with my favorite sounds around me.”) Within 10 minutes you should be able to think and speak pretty calmly, even though the situation may still be tense.

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Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Strategies to Handle Anxiety, continued

3 – Calm the Group. Of course, you cannot be responsible for how other people are handling their anxiety, but your own calmed-down state can influence the group you are in. It will take a group 8 to 16 minutes to respond to your quieter state. You don't have to talk anyone into being calm; all you have to do is *be* calm. You may be able to say, "Yes, this feels pretty upsetting to all of us," or "I'm trying to think about this carefully." Maybe you won't want to say anything at all. Within 16 minutes the people around you may start showing lower anxiety. Remember, the situation may still be tense; big problems don't just go away because people stop shouting. But with lowered anxiety, people are able to solve problems much faster and without adding new problems.

It is also possible that a group is so anxious that it cannot respond to your calmer state. In this case, you can only be satisfied that at least you took care of yourself. You will then have to take care that the group does not "re-infect" you with their continuing anxiety.

Origin of the Activity:

In a 1999 presentation I introduced hot potatoes to a group of teenaged parents, referencing the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. Audience members made comments about past family celebrations and their expectations for the upcoming holiday. Tossing the hot potatoes around the room, they named the individuals they expect to "pass them hot potatoes." (Father-in-law was the most frequently cited by females.) Discussion then turned to who inadvertently receives the anxiety being tossed around the family celebration: their babies. In this session, it was clear to me that participants were not accustomed to labeling "anxiety" as one of their experienced emotions. On the other hand, they absorbed the concepts and strategies easily and eagerly.

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Parenting Education Program in Schools



Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Training Notes

[representative information shared in training sessions of PEPS Educators]

Labeling Hot Potatoes:

If working with young people, label the hot potatoes immediately as proxies for anxiety. This will cut down on the number of games of toss that may follow. If working with an older group, experiment with *not* providing information about what the potatoes represent. A group that “discovers” the symbolism on its own may have a more meaningful ensuing discussion.

Follow-up Discussions:

Depending on the purpose of the group, follow-up discussions can center around questions such as:

What do you do when someone passes you a hot potato?

Are there negative side effects to your action?

What else might you do to soothe yourself (with fewer negative side effects)?

How does your family “do anxiety” ?

What can you do in the family to first lower your own anxiety and then to promote its lowering in the family system?

Being Directive (or Not):

Read the audience’s need for more or less direction. Some groups will be better served if this activity is offered merely for awareness-raising. Many people are very capable of finding their own solutions to handling anxiety. Too much direction (or too many recipes starting with “families should...”) may actually stifle their own creativity for finding solutions, or antagonize as being prescriptive.

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Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Training Notes

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Theoretical Underpinnings:

Bowen described anxiety as an inevitable component of every emotional unit. He said that patterns of anxiety are knowable, finite in number, and universal. Thus, much can be said for including discussion of anxiety in any program concerning family life.

Anxiety may be tied to a family's nodal events, to a person's level of maturity (anxiety is more automatic for people who are emotionally immature), to a crisis, to the functioning of a group, and simply to everyday life. Bowen distinguished between chronic and acute anxiety and said that chronic anxiety can actually be passed down through generations.

The "hot potato" symbol used in this activity is derived from Bowen's term, "emotional process." He described this as the tendency of emotions to pass in patterned ways from individual to individual, in families and any other type of group.

Bowen also discussed anxiety in terms of people who are fused. Anxiety naturally pushes people closer together (not necessarily in harmonious moods), and so promotes fusion. In a group setting such as the workplace, high anxiety will promote "taking sides" and making emotionally-based decisions. This exacerbates what we commonly call "office politics." Because group settings encourage labeling such as "alliances" and "teams," over-reliant relationships may not be accurately seen as fusion.

Brain research over the course of the 1990s has provided information about what parts of the brain are accessed when human subjects attempt certain tasks or recall certain emotions. Attention to the amygdala, for example, has identified it as a primary response area when humans first react to new or stressful situations. Evolutionary psychologists posit that the amygdala's quick response was responsible for survival when a human was faced with a hostile situation. In fact, it can still be life-saving when a human is confronted with danger. Unfortunately, it is similarly on call when a human is confronted with anxiety that is not life-threatening. (The impulse to strike back does not serve the human well in personal relationships.)

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Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around

Sources for this Activity and Training

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***Hot Potatoes: Tossing Anxiety Around* is an activity in the PEPS curriculum by Mary Bold, Ph.D., CFLE, and is published by The Parenting Center of Fort Worth, Texas. Activity Guide for *Hot Potatoes* is available online at www.marybold.com and may be used in nonprofit and educational settings with authorship credited to Mary Bold and publishing credited The Parenting Center. It may not be copied and distributed.**

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