Each day, hundreds of thousands of children in the United States leave school and go into some kind of after-school program. Sometimes the program is led by a teacher, parks and recreation employee or 4-H staffer. Staff and volunteers at the programs may be committed to youth but may have little or no training. Some staff may view the job as something to do until something better comes along. They may not realize that youth development is an important profession that has a big impact on children.

Jackie Reilly, a University of Nevada Cooperative Extension child and youth development specialist, is trying to change that. “Studies have shown that the training of the teachers and staff in after-school programs affects the quality of the experience children have,” she says. “But most of the time the staff are high school or college students with small budgets and no training. For most of them, it’s a stop-gap job. They don’t look at it as a profession. But it’s such an important job. What they do impacts kids for the rest of their lives.”

Reilly and colleagues Eric Killian from Cooperative Extension and Sharon Junge and Sue Mangallan from University of California Cooperative Extension, have developed two curricula to provide training to help after-school staff. One teaches core competencies to youth development professionals while the second provides science-rich learning environments in out-of-school-time settings.

“Tools of the Trade I: Giving Kids a Lifetime Guarantee” (TOT I) brings after-school workers the training they need to develop effective after-school programs. The TOT I curriculum uses a hands-on, interactive approach to teaching after-school workers child development and guidance, better management, communication and other skills that are vital to a successful after-school program.

Tools of the Trade II: Inspiring Youth to be SET* Ready for Life (“science, engineering and technology) curriculum provides hands-on learning opportunities for after-school workers to learn skills and knowledge to provide science-rich learning environments and activities.

The Tools of the Trade I curriculum is used across the country, and is mandatory for any after-school program that receives funding from the MetLife grants from National 4-H Council. This year the module will be taught in 13 states and is expected to reach more than 5,500 after-school workers.

The curriculum is also used by many extension professionals, public schools and private organizations across the country. Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension recently contracted with University of Nevada Cooperative Extension to train nearly 70 new TOT teachers who will bring the course to hundreds of after-school workers in that state. Reilly and her colleagues have trained other future TOT instructors at conferences in Baltimore, New Orleans, Penn State, Arizona, Reno and Las Vegas.

By emphasizing to after-school workers that their jobs carry weighty responsibilities, Tools of the Trade programs help ensure that after-school programs are effective and provide quality experiences for children.
of the Trade may encourage young adults and teens to go into child or youth development as a career. Just as importantly, it also convinces some to find a new line of work. For those who are working in the field, TOT training can provide them with skills and knowledge to provide positive experiences for the youth in their program and to view themselves as youth development professionals with a very important job.

“You learn what it means to be a youth worker, a youth development professional,” Reilly says. “You learn about development levels and how to respond to them in a positive way.”

After-school teachers who take the class are presented with different common scenarios and invited to discuss ways to handle them. This process involves acting out the scenarios and giving after-school workers practice that pays off later when they are confronted with the real thing. There are other sections on building strong relationships with parents, and practical help on designing strong programs.

“If kids are occupied and creatively engaged, there will be fewer problems to deal with,” Reilly says.

Ultimately, the goal is to help the many young after-school teachers to become skilled and effective.

“Kids love having teens (as teachers),” Reilly says. “It’s a win-win situation as long as the teachers have the training and support they need.”

And the demand isn’t expected to lessen any time soon. Reilly says more children are in after-school programs than ever before, and the number of middle school and high school after-school programs is growing as many students seek to improve their scores on standardized tests.

According to the National 4-H Council, 15 million children are left alone and unsupervised after school. A Nevada study found that 28 percent of the state’s school children are on their own in the afternoons, and another 18 percent are in the care of their brothers or sisters.

In 2009 Reilly and Manglallan from California’s Cooperative Extension and Claudia Mincemoyer from Penn State began work on an online version of Tools of the Trade curricula. The first lesson will be completed this year, with many more expected to follow to make the learning modules available to an even broader audience of youth workers.

Jim Sloan is the communications specialist for Cooperative Extension.

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