

Introduction

BACKGROUND & BEGINNINGS

A WHAT WE'VE BECOME

In 1996, welfare-to-work became an issue many individuals and communities were forced to address. It wasn't easy for either group.

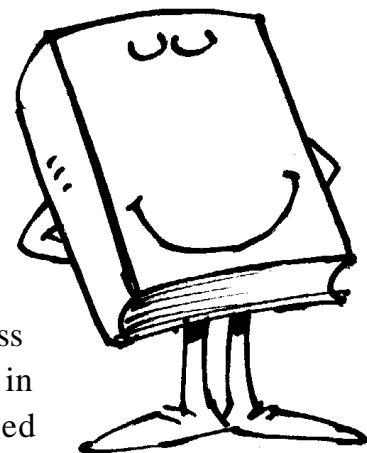
Many women (and some men) being forced into the workplace had no experience with getting or keeping a job. More than any other emotion, they experienced fear . . . fear that their children would not receive appropriate care, fear that incomes could not replace support systems threatening to disappear, and perhaps most of all, fear of failure.

Communities, especially employers, felt inadequate too. "We can teach people how to do the job we want done," they told us in focus groups, "but we don't know how to teach them to show up on time, to get along with their bosses or co-workers or to communicate in positive and meaningful ways."

Tackling the Tough Skills™ was an attempt to address some of those misgivings and inadequacies. Piloted in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1998 with a program called WorkWays™, the curriculum attempted to allay the fears of both participants and communities by focusing on life and work skills.

Tackling the Tough Skills™ is about people. It's about where they've been, what they've learned, and how they use the information they have. But, mostly, it's about whom they are and where they want to go. It's about recognizing strengths and realizing potential.

Tackling the Tough Skills™ is a curriculum based on the principle that learning does not have to be painful in order to be effective. Incorporated interactive teaching techniques encourage the learner to both explore and express his/her own thoughts and feelings. Fun activities provide practice for the skill just learned. Exercises are



designed to deliver an “Aha!” effect in similar situations outside the classroom environment. There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone’s opinion is valid. Everyone has something to teach and something to learn.

Because individuals do not live solely in the workplace, *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ is designed to be holistic in scope. Stress does not occur in neat little compartments or only at work. Challenges spill from one area of life into the next. An ecological model of family resiliency, based on work by Bronfenbrenner and Dunst (Silliman, 1995), correlates individual coping ability directly to interrelationships with others, whether in the workplace, the family or the community. The more supportive each entity is of the other, they note, the more resilient the individual becomes, and the better able to cope with life’s difficulties, no matter where they occur.

Using this holistic outlook, *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ places participants in a variety of settings, which encourages cross-over from individualized critical thinking to thinking within the framework of family, work, and community. Participants understand that action taken in one area of life affects all other areas as well. Resiliency is evident when an individual can apply the same knowledge to different situations.



What has occurred since 1998 has amazed all of us involved with *Tackling the Tough Skills*™. The curriculum has been purchased by agencies in all 50 states and numerous countries, including Canada, England, Australia, Ecuador, Korea and Hungary. An agency in Kuwait has been granted permission to translate it into Arabic. Programs working with groups as diverse as Mennonite and 4-H youth, prisoners and ex-offenders, the unemployed and under-employed, abusers and the abused, pregnant teens, and immigrant populations are using the curriculum.

Although the curriculum builds from *Attitude* to *Responsibility* to *Communication* to *Problem Solving* to *Preparing for the Workplace*, no curriculum police will descend upon the educator who chooses to sequence it differently. Learning must make sense to both educator and student. Audiences vary. Needs change.

The concepts in *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ are not new ones. Yet, even my views about the curriculum have changed throughout the years . . . maybe not in actuality, but in the language I use when describing the book and its impact. I now talk about the constructs of *critical thinking* and *emotional intelligence*. The primary goal of *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ was always to get people thinking in new ways about concepts that affected their everyday lives and to encourage the

change needed to reach potential. I just never called it critical thinking.

Then I was asked to do a workshop on emotional intelligence. When I began to research the tenets of EI, I was amazed that many ideas were parallel or even identical to those expressed in *Tackling the Tough Skills*™. Enlightenment is perhaps only recognizing and understanding what already is.



I have made an extreme effort in *Tough Skills* not to be “preachy.” Perhaps I have not always succeeded, but the curriculum’s interactive approach is an attempt to get people thinking about what is best for them and those they live and work with.

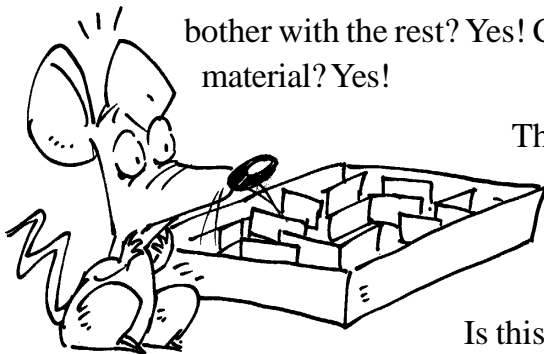
Tackling the Tough Skills™ can be as flexible as the educator is creative. Needs, audiences and educators vary. So should programs using *Tough Skills*. Perhaps Albert Einstein said it best: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Except for quotes, referenced items and pieces specifically noted, the work has been created by the author.

B. HOW DO I USE IT? HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

I am often asked what’s the best way to use *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ . . . and how long does it take to get through the curriculum?

Should I start at the beginning and stop at the end? Yes! Can I start in the middle and not include all the exercises? Yes! Can I only use a segment of the book and not bother with the rest? Yes! Can I supplement some of my own material? Yes!



The point is: Just as there is no right or wrong answer in the book, there is no right or wrong way to use *Tackling the Tough Skills*™.

What about time? I only have 2 weeks and 6 hours. Is this enough time to get through the entire curriculum?

From the beginning of the book to the end, no. But it’s okay to pick and choose those teaching points and exercises you most want to share with your participants. If you have 8 hours, you can pick a few more.



Let me share some of my own experiences with *Tackling the Tough Skills*™. I have used the curriculum with a wide array of audiences, including high school students in danger of dropping out, ex-offenders, and people struggling in the workplace.

If I have the luxury of time with a single audience, I prefer to start at the beginning of the book and continue in sequence to the end. The curriculum chapters do build on one another, and this is a sure way of not missing any of the concepts that might show up in a later chapter.

I have found that 12 sessions (two hours each) is ideal for presenting all of the concepts and most of the exercises. There may, however, be specific activities and exercises that your group of participants does not need. For example, if you are working with a group of already-employed individuals, they might not benefit from everything in the “Preparing for the Workplace” chapter. You may want to focus more on actual work skills that they are struggling with, rather than how to interview and write a resume.

When we did the welfare-to-work program back in the early days of *Tackling the Tough Skills*™, we had individuals for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week for 3 weeks. The curriculum was a large part of the program, but we also helped with job search, mentoring and counseling around other issues.

How you use the curriculum depends a great deal on your participants, their needs, and on you, the educator. I do strongly suggest that enough time be programmed into your sessions to allow for ample discussion and processing of the information that ensues. This is assuredly one of the most valuable learning tools for all involved.

Here is a sample agenda that might help in setting up sessions:

Week 1: Attitude is a state of mind (Part I: from beginning of Attitude to Individual Strengths)

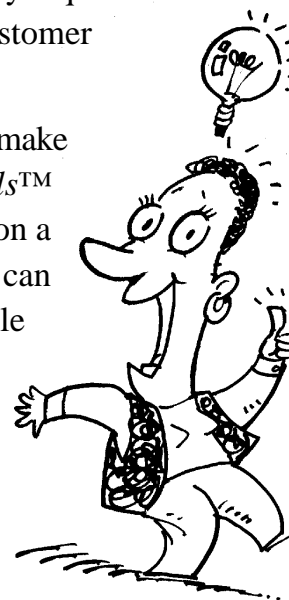
Week 2: Building “I”-ceps (Part I: Individual Strengths to end of chapter)



- Week 3:** Who’s responsible? (Part II: beginning of Responsibility to Responsibility and Commitment)
- Week 4:** Making the commitment (Part II: Responsibility and Commitment to end of chapter)
- Week 5:** Talking, listening and body language (Part III: beginning of Communication to Conflict Resolution)
- Week 6:** Dealing with conflict (Part III: Conflict Resolution to Anger Management)
- Week 7:** Difficult people, anger and “I” statements (Part III: Anger Management to end of chapter)
- Week 8:** Creative decision making (Part IV: beginning of Problem Solving to Working Together)
- Week 9:** Working Together (Part IV: Working Together to end of chapter)
- Week 10:** Work is an attitude (Part V: Preparing for the Workplace to Job Search)
- Week 11:** How do I get this job (Part V: Job Search to end of chapter)
- Week 12:** Celebrations, Certificates and “Cwestions” (a good place to do evaluation, present certificates, review materials, have a party)

Every audience will not need 12 weeks. Participants who are somewhat skilled in the concepts, have a job, or are proficient in certain areas may only require 10 weeks. You may wish to stop there or add other sessions in customer service, emotional intelligence or advanced critical thinking.

Socrates once said: “I cannot teach anybody anything; I can only make them think.” Socrates could have had *Tackling the Tough Skills*™ in mind when he made this statement. Hopefully we are all on a pathway to higher, more selfless thinking and learning. We can always get better. As educators, our job is to start where people are and walk with them to the next level.



C. WHAT'S NEW?

- **Addenda:** We grant permission for educators to photocopy the addenda at the end of each chapter for classroom use only. We've added "Learning Points" and a "Preface" to the beginning of each addenda section so these can be copied and given to participants.
- **Activities:** We've changed a few activities and added others. Note especially the following:
 - Part III Communication:
 - Activity 8, Seven C's of Conflict Resolution
 - Activity 14, Steps to Anger Management
 - Activity 17, Changing "You" to "I"
 - Part IV Problem Solving:
 - Activity 1, It's Getting to be a Habit!
 - Activity 5, Rules of Brainstorming
 - Part V Preparing for the Workplace
 - Section 3, But . . . is it worth it?
 - Activity 3, Bring It On! Doing What I Can to Increase Job Satisfaction
 - Activity 6, Workers With More Education Earn *More!*
 - Activity 6, Workers With More Education are *Less* Likely to be *Unemployed*
- **Sample course agenda:** We've included a sample 12-week agenda in the Introduction.
- **List of Activities and Addenda:** We've added a list for each chapter's activities and corresponding addenda pages in the Introduction.
- **More diverse scenarios:** Some new scenarios have been added that represent people in various life, work and school situations, including teens.



D. WHAT OUR PARTICIPANTS SAY

Tackling the Tough Skills™ was piloted in University of Missouri Extension's *WorkWays*™ program in St. Louis from November 1998 through November 1999. Its purpose was to help people transition smoothly to work, retain employment, and successfully cope with work and family issues. Almost all of the participants were mandated to attend. Most came with an attitude of not wanting to be in the class. Some were angry. A few were hostile. Though participants represented a variety of educational levels, the majority had dropped out of high school.

Evaluation of the program used both qualitative and quantitative techniques. In July 1999, 52 individuals who had participated in the *WorkWays*™ program were randomly chosen and interviewed. At that time, 11 participants were either in GED programs or scheduled to begin within two weeks. Six had gone on for post-secondary education (either at a community college or a four-year university). Six were in job specific training programs. Four were getting job experience through community service programs. Ten were gainfully employed. The rest were deciding which direction to take, actively looking for work, or trying to arrange childcare so they could move on. Comments from participants reflect impact of the educational process:



- √ “I (am now) more motivated, and I just found that just to have the time with the other participants and the teacher and just doing the things that we were doing and getting the feedback from each other . . . I just found it extremely helpful and motivating.”
- √ “. . . it was like waking me up. I guess I had just gotten to the mentality that I wasn’t going to be able to exercise the plan that I had for myself, and going through *WorkWays*™ really helped me to wake up to it . . . that yes, I really can do it!”
- √ “One of the things that helped me the most was to control my anger. I have a bad temper and somebody can say one wrong thing to me and I can go off. Now I’ve learned how to just be quiet for a minute and listen.”
- √ “I didn’t communicate with the neighbors at first. You know, ’cause I wouldn’t talk around people. But now we got a little neighborhood watch going on and I participate in that.”
- √ (*After the program*) “I’m happier now than I’ve been in some years. I’m more confident in me and for the first time I can honestly say I love me. This made me a more rounded person than I was before . . . You can’t do for others until you can do for you, and that’s what the program brought to me.”

REFERENCE

Silliman, B. (1995, July). Understanding resiliency. In *Family resiliency: Building strengths to meet life’s challenges* (CSREES-USDA, National Network for Family Resiliency, Children, Youth and Families Network, EDC-53, p. 3). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension. Available at the CYFERNET Web site: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/EDC53.pdf>