Illinois Health and Hospital Association

Half of Illinois children and adolescents experienced one or more worsening mental health symptoms, with irritability symptoms most common, as reported through a March 2024 survey of 1,000 parents. Carle Richland Memorial Hospital has made educating youth in the communities they serve a priority, alongside providing high-quality care for those in need of mental and behavioral healthcare.

Carle Richland launched an elementary school program that brings in a hospital mental health first aid instructor to help children better understand their emotions and how to express their feelings appropriately. The program is designed around the “Little SPOT of Emotion” books by Diane Alber.

The hospital’s outreach focuses on second graders. A refresher course is offered three times per year in third and fourth grade classrooms. Starting in 2027, the program will extend to fifth graders.

“This program wouldn’t work without the support of the teachers, and I am so thankful for them” said Leslie Shan, the Carle Richland mental health first aid instructor. “They check in with each student every day, sometimes twice a day, and if the student responds with an angry, sad or anxious emotion, the teacher takes them aside for a one-on-one to get them back to peaceful.”

The model connects each emotion to a color. Anger, for example, is red and yellow is happy. Students are taught to tell their teacher if they are feeling “red” or another emotion-specific color. Daily check-ins by teachers, in addition to Shan visiting the class monthly, help to decrease the amount of outbursts and class disruptions.

Each second-grade classroom is equipped with a “peaceful spot” that includes a green bean bag—as green is the color for calm—fidget toys and other aides. Students feeling stressed can remove themselves from any situation by spending some time in the “peaceful spot.”

During the first half of the year students learn how to identify their own emotions and why they may be feeling a certain emotion. By the second half of the year, the young learners can decipher the emotions of their classmates. Parents can participate through “Little SPOT of Emotion” packets on how to assist their child through feelings of anger, sadness or anxiety outside of school hours.

Given the positive response, Carle Richland is swiftly expanding the program. In addition to the planned growth to fifth grade, discussions are underway on bringing the experience to seventh graders. The goal is to keep students mindful of their mental health and the mental health of others. With this knowledge, students are empowered to help themselves and their classmates return to a calm, peaceful state where they can learn and interact better with others.