



John Louder

## Dad Listens Better

Understanding Youth—A Project for Adults Helping Early Adolescents *By Lorraine B. Kingdon*

**M**y dad understands me better; he opens up more," David Arce, 13, says. "He'll take time to talk with me when I have an important problem." The son of Mike Arce, a Yuma 4-H leader, is commenting about changes he's noted since his dad attended four training sessions on dealing with early adolescents.

The 12 hours of intensive teaching aimed at professional caregivers, 4-H leaders and parents are sponsored by the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension FamilyWise Task Force. Victoria Steinfelt, the Yuma County Extension home economics agent,

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was an instructor at the "Skills III—Working with the Early Adolescent" meetings Arce took part in.

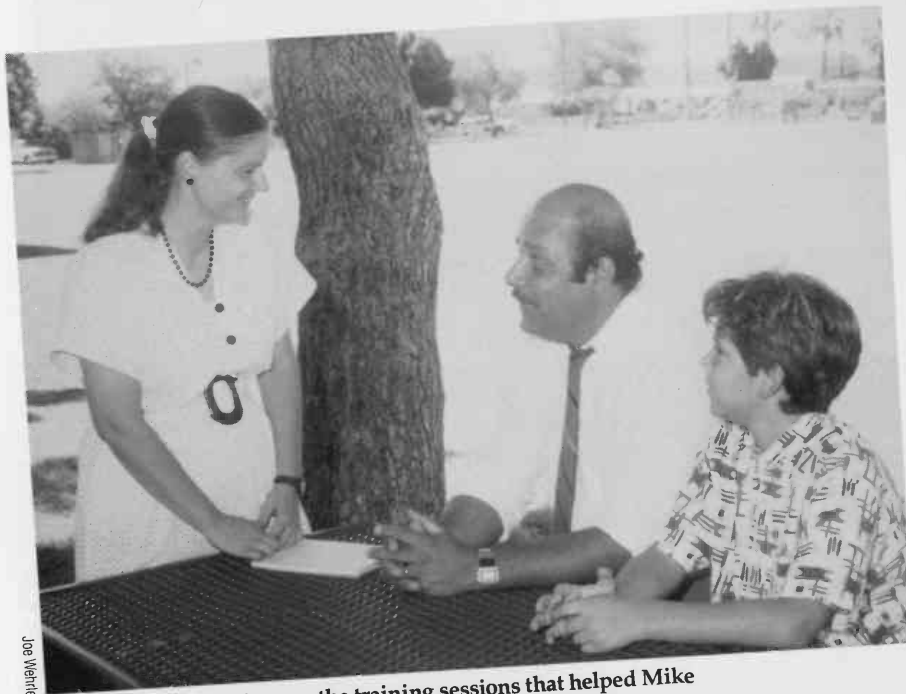
Mike Arce, who also is a sales representative for Yuma's KTTI-FM radio station, is the father of two boys.

"I read about Skills III in our 4-H newsletter, and I thought it would be

advantageous to get bona fide training that I could use in my 4-H work," Arce says. "I saw a change in myself over the length of the course, particularly in listening skills. Young people this age need help beginning to set their own goals—parents need to be available to listen.

"I wish more parents had gone—a lot who are throwing up their hands about their kids now could have benefited," Arce says. "The skills I learned even work with adults—I've tried them at the office."

Steinfelt worked for four years to develop the series with team members Annette Firth, a Cochise County Extension 4-H agent and home econo-



Joe Wente

Victoria Steinfelt talks over the training sessions that helped Mike Arce (center) learn to listen to his son David.

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mist in Willcox; Janet Paz, a Santa Cruz County Extension home economist in Nogales; Beth Tucker, Coconino County Extension director and home economist in Flagstaff; Lynas Waun, Cochise County Extension home economist in Willcox; and Carol Willis, Graham County Extension home economist in Safford.

"We decided we could have the greatest impact working with parents and caregivers instead of the young people themselves," Steinfelt says. "And, we picked the ages 9 to 13 to concentrate on because parents still can strongly influence their children. This is an age when children start to change—physically, socially, mentally and emotionally—and that can be tough for parents."

The end product of their four-year program development is a series of four, 2 to 3 hour sessions, including thoroughly researched background information about early adolescents, role playing, a study of case histories and family experiences. The sessions zero in on parenting skills and techniques, as well as issues that concern families today.

A typical scenario the trainees considered was "What do you do if you discover a marijuana cigarette in your child's pocket?" The answer? "Don't panic or scream or automatically punish," Steinfelt says. "Use your communications skills to find out why the cigarette is there and go on from that point." The home economics team stressed that parents need to allow children of this age to accept responsibility for their actions and the natural results of their decisions.

In successive sessions, their program focuses on:

- helping understand how early adolescents are changing,
- improving family communications,
- developing positive self-esteem,
- helping children solve problems and make decisions,
- teaching children to act responsibly,
- finding support and professional help, and
- taking care of yourself as an adult, parent or caregiver.

So far, the task force members have tested and evaluated their series with more than 150 parents, caregivers and professional Extension faculty in 14 Arizona counties. Also, team members obtained a \$5,000 Cooperative Extension Enhancement Grant allowing them, among other things, to get feedback from the course participants.

"I learned how important it is to listen to my children." Typical responses focused on listening to children—communicating—understanding. Those who had taken the course said they particularly liked "the real-life facilitation," but some parents wanted more practice time. They worried about putting their new knowledge into action consistently and effectively with their families.

"In reviewing evaluations, observing other parenting classes, and interviewing parents in the program, it was apparent that there is an overall need and desire for a program that helps parents understand their 9 to 13-year-old," says Tracy Paz, a professional marketing consultant from Phoenix who was hired to analyze Skills III and suggest changes.

For starters, she suggested changing the name. "Skills III: Working with the Early Adolescent" impressed people who had not taken part as "too clinical," "uninteresting," "too hard," and confusing. One person asked, "What kind of charity is it?" The new name Paz suggested—and the task force accepted—is UNDERSTANDING YOUTH.

Paz says that the newly named UNDERSTANDING YOUTH team, "has many marketing opportunities to continue to develop through schools and local and state agencies. The challenge lies in encouraging this referral base to guide parents. Competition with other parenting programs is currently very modest within small communities in Arizona." Steinfelt says they're working on a marketing plan to take the UNDERSTANDING YOUTH series nationwide.

Contact Annette Firth and Lynas Waun at the Cochise County Extension Office, 450 S. Haskell, Willcox, AZ 85643, or call (602) 384-3594. Contact Janet Paz at the Santa Cruz County Extension Office, P.O. Box 1585, Nogales, AZ 85628, or call (602) 281-4965. Contact Vickie Steinfelt at the Yuma County Extension Office, 198 S. Main Street, Yuma, AZ 85364, or call (602) 329-2150. Contact Beth Tucker at the Coconino County Extension Office, 2400 S. Milton Road, Flagstaff, AZ 86001, or call (602) 774-1868. Contact Carol Willis at the Graham County Extension Office, 921 Thatcher Blvd., Safford, AZ 85546, or call (602) 428-2611.