

Best Practices in Prevention: *Second Step* Focus on Risk and Protective Factors

Over the past several decades, a public health approach has been applied successfully to problems as diverse as heart disease, traffic deaths, tobacco use, dental health, and HIV/AIDS prevention. This effective approach emphasizes primary prevention—that is, addressing the problem before it begins—by identifying the risk factors that increase the likelihood of the problem and the protective factors that buffer individuals from the effects of risks.

Stopping Problems Before They Start

To use the example of heart disease, rather than waiting until a person had a heart attack or stroke, researchers identified early predictors—risk factors—that made heart attacks or strokes more likely, such as smoking, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, stress, and family history of heart disease. They also identified protective factors that reduced the impact of those risk factors, such as high levels of HDL (or “good” cholesterol) and regular aerobic exercise. Interventions could then be designed to target these risk and protective factors, preventing heart disease before it could lead to heart attacks and stroke.

Addressing Multiple Problems at Once

Researchers looking for ways to prevent adolescent problems, such as substance abuse, delinquency, violence, and school failure have identified factors in multiple areas of children’s and adolescents’ lives that increase their risk of problems or promote their healthy development. Prevention interventions that target these factors are usually successful because the same risk and protective factors are often linked to multiple problem behaviors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). For example, having friends who engage in problem behaviors puts young people at increased risk for using substances, fighting, and truancy. On the other hand, feeling a sense of belonging or connection to school protects students from all three of these problems. Research on risk and protective factors has laid the groundwork for programs that can simultaneously prevent multiple problems, so schools will no longer need a separate program for each concern (Coie et al., 1993; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001).

How the *Second Step* Program Fits In

Reducing risk and increasing protection to safeguard youth from a wide range of problems is central to the design and scope of the *Second Step* program. Because it is a classroom-based program, it focuses on the risk and protective factors that can be addressed in school settings, with specific factors targeted as they become developmentally relevant for students. For example, having social skills is a powerful protective factor addressed throughout the [Pre/K–8 *Second Step*](#) program by teaching empathy, impulse-control, problem-solving, emotion-management, and cooperation skills. Conversely, attitudes toward drug and alcohol use become critical risk factors for substance abuse by the time students reach middle school, which is why grades 6–8 of the *Second Step* program feature lessons targeting this risk factor.

From pre/kindergarten through grade 8, the [Second Step program](#) is designed to address the risk and protective factors listed below, all of which are linked to multiple problem behaviors.

Risk factors:

- Inappropriate classroom behavior, such as aggression and impulsivity
- Favorable attitudes toward a problem behavior (such as violence or substance abuse)
- Friendships with others who engage in a problem behavior
- Early initiation of a problem behavior
- Peer rewards for antisocial behavior
- Peer rejection
- Impulsiveness

Protective factors:

- Social skills
- School connectedness
- Adoption of conventional norms about drug use

For more information on how risk and protective factors are addressed in the *Second Step* middle school program, go to our [Web site](#).

References

- Coie, J. D., Watt, N. F., West, S. G., Hawkins, J. D., Asarnow, J. R., Ramey, S. L., et al. (1993). The science of prevention: A conceptual framework and some directions for a national research program. *American Psychologist*, 48, 1013–1022.
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C., & Bumbarger, B. (2001). The prevention of mental disorders in school-aged children: Current state of the field. *Prevention and Treatment*, 4(1). Retrieved from <http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume4/pre004001a.html>.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 64–105.