

Review of Research for the SECOND STEP Pre/K and Elementary Programs

Violent and aggressive behaviors have been a longstanding public health concern and the focus of much scientific research since its impact on families, schools, communities, and individual lives is significant. Children with poor social and emotional skills are at risk for developing problems in relationships (see Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992), school (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998) and throughout childhood and adolescence (Campbell, 1995; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Problematic behavior becomes less malleable over time (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Tremblay et al., 1992), and there is also evidence that aggressive behavior often precedes more serious behavior, such as delinquency, school dropout, and substance abuse (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992; Stattin & Magnusson, 1996).

Therefore, much attention has been placed on developing prevention programs that address underlying risk factors and deter the escalation of problem behavior.

SECOND STEP: A Violence Prevention Curriculum is a universal prevention program for preschool through eighth grade that is designed to reduce aggression and promote prosocial behavior.

The SECOND STEP program is grounded in the integration of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), social information-processing theory (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986), and cognitive-behavioral theory (Kendall & Braswel, 1985). Concepts and strategies from these frameworks constitute the three critical skill areas considered crucial competencies for preventing aggressive behavior and promoting prosocial behaviors: empathy (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001), problem-solving skills (Crick & Dodge, 1994), and anger management (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Losoya, 1997).

Research on the SECOND STEP program provides evidence that teaching these three core competencies, combined with teaching and practicing specific behavioral skills, can prevent problematic behavior (see research section below).

Empathy

The SECOND STEP program begins with a focus on empathy. Young children who are better at labeling and describing emotions (empathy skills) are better accepted by their peers (Fabes et al., 1994). Empathy also motivates people to respond in a caring way. Children are more likely to offer help and emotional support if they can take another's perspective (Carlo, Knight, Eisenberg, & Rotenberg, 1991; Litvack-Miller, McDougall, & Romney, 1997).

Children's understanding of their peers' intentions may also affect their aggressiveness (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Empathy skills provide a foundation on which problem-solving and emotion-management skills are built. The SECOND STEP program covers several key components of empathy: knowledge about emotions, taking the perspectives of others, and responding with sensitivity to others.

Research shows that empathy improves children's social behaviors (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher, & Bridges, 2000) and academic performance (Izard, Fine, Schultz, Mostow, & Ackerman, 2001). In addition, young children who are better at labeling and describing emotions (empathy skills) also tend to be better accepted by their peers (Fabes et al., 1994).

Impulse Control and Problem Solving

Research shows that aggressive children have deficits in social problem solving (Dodge & Frame, 1982) because they generate more hostile attributions and fail to generate prosocial responses to social problems than their peers (Crick & Ladd, 1990; Rubin, Bream, & Rose-Krasnor, 1991). They are more certain that aggressive strategies will work, they judge aggressive strategies as less likely to cause harm, and they have lower expectations that prosocial strategies will work (Crick & Ladd, 1990).

Furthermore, they may lack the behavioral skills to enact more competent responses (Dodge et al., 1985). The SECOND STEP elementary curriculum addresses the six steps to socially competent behavior that are rooted in Dodge's (1986) social-information processing model. These include: identifying one's feelings, identifying the problem, brainstorming solutions, selecting a solution, carrying out the selected solution, and evaluating the outcome of the decision.

In the elementary school version, the first three steps are more heavily emphasized. Two additional elements covered include skills for making and keeping friends (such as fairness and joining in) and prosocial communication strategies.

Emotion/Anger Management

Effective emotion management is related to decreased levels of aggression (Underwood, 1992) and increased levels of social and emotional competence (for a review, see Eisenberg, Fabes, & Losoya, 1997). A child who is good at emotion management is one who can deal with strong emotions and express them in socially acceptable ways (for a review, see Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998).

The emotion/anger management unit introduces children to calming-down strategies. Children learn to recognize anger triggers and physical signs that they are angry. Those signs are cues that it is time to use the anger-management strategies they learned. They learn to prevent escalation of

angry feelings by using strategies to relax, like counting, taking deep breaths, and making helpful self-statements (for example, "I can calm down"). In the elementary programs, children also learn to apply the problem-solving steps. Research shows that children can be taught to manage feelings, such as anger (Nelson & Finch, 2000). Domain-specific behavior skills in the unit concern events that are typically stressful for many children, such as being left out, dealing with criticism, and keeping out of fights.

An expanded review of the research underlying the SECOND STEP program, titled "SECOND STEP: Preventing Aggression by Promoting Social Competence," can be seen in the Summer 2000 issue of *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*.

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