

Summary of the Review of Research

The *Second Step* middle school program is a universal, classroom-based prevention program designed to decrease aggression, bullying, and substance abuse and increase students' social skills and school success. As a program for all students, it provides a foundation for creating a safe, respectful learning environment.

Introduction: Combining School and Life Success

Problem behaviors in middle school are a big concern, even more than in elementary or high school. Research shows that schools needn't choose between preventing problem behaviors and promoting student success (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998). By teaching students social and personal skills, the *Second Step* middle school program prevents problem behaviors, such as bullying and substance abuse, and promotes school success.

Early Adolescent Development

Developmental considerations in early adolescence (ages 12 to 15 years) include:

- Biological changes, such as puberty
- Cognitive changes, such as the ability to plan ahead
- Environmental changes from elementary to middle school or junior high settings
- Social changes, such as increased need of support and pressure in peer relationships

Research shows that early adolescents can benefit from universal prevention programs, such as the *Second Step* middle school program, that target behaviors, skills, and beliefs (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002).

Risk and Protective Factors Framework

The *Second Step* middle school program was designed to reduce risk factors and increase the protective factors that safeguard youth. Risk factors pose dangers that take away from student success. Risk factors addressed in *Second Step* lessons include:

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

Protective factors prevent the onset of or buffer the risks for harmful behavior. Protective factors targeted by *Second Step* lessons include:

- Social skills
- School connectedness and engagement with teachers and peers who do not support aggression or substance abuse
- Adoption of conventional norms about substance abuse and school success

The Five Themes in the *Second Step* Program

Developmental theory and findings related to risk and protective factors are addressed in five themes developed across classroom lessons. These themes are:

- Empathy and communication
- Bullying prevention
- Emotion management and coping
- Problem solving, decision making, and goal setting
- Substance abuse prevention

1. Empathy and communication

Empathy entails being able to identify, understand, and respond to how someone is feeling. Having a high level of empathy is linked to being socially skilled (Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006), having friends (Crick & Dodge, 1994), and making academic gains (Katsurada & Sugawara, 1998; Wentzel, 1991, 1993). People with high levels of empathy are less likely to behave aggressively (Kaukiainen et al., 1999).

Empathy and communication skills that can be taught include:

- Identifying feelings in self and others
- Actively listening to others
- Identifying and respecting the perspectives of others
- Asserting your own views and values in an appropriate way

Empathy and communication skills are linked to the following risk and protective factors:

- Reduction in inappropriate classroom behaviors, such as aggression
- Reduction in peer rejection
- Increased social skills
- Increased school connectedness and engagement

2. Bullying prevention

Bullying is a repeated pattern of aggression that involves an imbalance of power and intent to harm. The harmful outcomes of bullying and victimization are well documented. Studies suggest bullying peaks in the middle school grades (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000).

Bullying prevention skills that can be taught include:

- Friendship skills, such as conflict resolution
- Assertiveness skills
- Responsible bystander behaviors, such as intervening appropriately and being an ally

Bullying prevention skills are linked to the following risk and protective factors:

- Reduction in peer rewards for antisocial behavior (bullying)
- Reduction in peer rejection
- Reduction in favorable attitudes toward problem behavior (bullying)
- Increased social skills
- Increased school connectedness and engagement

3. Emotion management (grade 6) and coping (grades 7 and 8)

Emotion management enables youth to stay in control, especially in stressful situations. Coping skills help them meet challenges by using proactive strategies rather than acting on impulse.

Emotion management and coping skills that can be taught include self-calming techniques, such as deep breathing, and positive self-talk.

Emotion management and coping skills are linked to the following risk and protective factors:

- Reduction in impulsiveness
- Increased social skills
- Increased school connectedness and engagement

4. Problem solving (grade 6), decision making (grade 7), and goal setting (grade 8)

The *Second Step* Action Steps are taught across all levels of the program. The steps students learn and practice are:

- A: Analyze the situation.
- B: Brainstorm options.
- C: Consider each option.
- D: Decide on and Do the best option.
- E: Evaluate if it works. *If necessary:*
- F: Figure out another way.

Teaching students interpersonal problem-solving skills can reduce and prevent problem behaviors (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998; Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Because conformity to peer pressure peaks in early

adolescence (Berndt, 1979), this is a good time to teach decision-making skills as well. It is also an opportune time for students to practice setting goals, an ability linked to student success and achievement (Covington, 2000).

Action steps in relation to problem solving, decision making, and goal setting are linked to the following risk and protective factors:

- Reduction in impulsiveness
- Reduction in peer rejection
- Increased social skills
- Increased school connectedness and engagement

5. Substance abuse prevention

The *Second Step* substance abuse lessons focus on providing accurate information and building on social and personal skills addressed in previous lessons. These skills include the ability to recognize and resist problematic choices. The primary goal is to reduce early initiation.

Skills, attitudes, and information that can be taught include:

- Assertiveness skills
- Problem-solving, decision-making, and goal-setting skills
- Accurate information about rates of use of substances among peers

Skills and attitudes relative to substance abuse are linked to the following risk and protective factors:

- Reduction of friendships with peers who use substances
- Reduction of inappropriate behavior in the classroom, such as aggression
- Reduction in favorable attitudes toward problem behaviors (substance abuse)
- Increased social skills
- Increased adoption of conventional norms about substance use
- Increased school connectedness and engagement

Instructional Practices to Support Program Goals

Activities and tips for effective instructional practices across program themes are included in *Second Step* middle school materials. Children learn new skills best through teaching, observation, rehearsal, and feedback in the context of social interaction (Bandura, 1977).

Strategies to support new learning include:

- Using interactive techniques
- Teaching and supporting effective group-work practices
- Modeling the social-emotional and communication skills the program teaches
- Cueing, coaching, and providing feedback on skills students are using

Conclusion

The *Second Step* middle school program aims to reduce risk factors, such as aggression, peer rejection, and early initiation of substance abuse. It is also intended to increase protective factors, such as social skills, school connectedness, and engagement. Using high-interest, interactive lessons, the program addresses the problematic behaviors and core competencies shown to affect school success of middle school students.

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