

Second Step Middle School Complete Review of Research

Introduction: Combining School and Life Success

Schools are at the hub of social change and pressure. They face increasing demands not only to boost academic achievement, but also to help students avoid risks, such as substance use, and prepare them for life success. Middle schools are especially challenged in this regard because during these years, students witness and take part in more problem behaviors than at any other time in their educational careers (Gottfredson et al., 2000). In fact, students in middle school encounter considerable challenges, temptations, and opportunities.

It is simply not realistic for middle schools to carry out separate initiatives to address each developmental need and problem. Fortunately, research shows that schools do not have to choose between preventing problems and promoting students' academic and personal success (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998). Studies have shown that many problem behaviors, such as substance use and interpersonal violence, share similar underlying causes related to social skills. This suggests that a comprehensive prevention effort focused on increasing the social and personal skills of all students is the best approach. The *Second Step* middle school program specifically aims to prevent or reduce aggression, violence, and substance abuse through the promotion of the attitudes and social and problem-solving skills that are linked to interpersonal and academic success. In this way, the program seeks to promote the skills and attitudes that predict student success in school and in life.

This design of the *Second Step* middle school program draws on theory and research about adolescent development and a risk and protective factors framework. In this review, we first summarize information about the developmental tasks of early adolescence, then give an overview of risk and protective factors addressed by *Second Step* classroom-based lessons. Next follows an overview of how theory and

supporting research relate to the five themes addressed in the curriculum. We close with a summary of research related to instructional practices that support the program goals.

Early Adolescent Development: A Time of Challenge and Opportunity

Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, youth experience the rapid biological and social changes of puberty. They wish for more autonomy at the same time as they are encountering more opportunities to engage in risky behaviors. In addition, they typically make a significant environmental transition from elementary to middle school or junior high. For example, they now have several teachers rather than one, and they experience less social support and increased daily stress in school (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). For these reasons, many students in middle school feel less cared about by teachers and less connected to school than do children in elementary school (Wentzel, 1994). The turmoil of this time increases opportunities for both positive and negative outcomes, making this an especially opportune time to provide the skills and support to succeed (Eccles, 1999).

During this time, there is also a developmental and social shift away from external control by parents and other adults as youth begin to internalize and make their own decisions. The ability to use logic and reasoning, plan ahead, solve problems, and understand the long-term consequences of actions increases gradually during early adolescence (Eccles, 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2006). As these abilities develop, adolescents are better able to regulate their behavior and make responsible decisions. However, research on cognitive and brain development shows that competent self-control may not be completely developed until a full

decade after early adolescence (Dahl & Hariri, 2004). This means that early adolescence is an important time to “scaffold” the development of students’ abilities to control and regulate their emotions and develop effective problem solving, planning, and decision-making skills. It is also a good time to help them develop goals and identify strategies for coping, which are inversely linked to substance abuse (Wills, 1986).

Another significant change in early adolescence concerns the role and influence of peer relationships. Friends provide an increasingly important source of support as adolescents move away from emotional dependence on parents (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). This presents both risks and benefits. Adolescents who have friends with problem behaviors (such as substance abuse or aggression) or positive attitudes toward problem behaviors are at increased risk of engaging in problematic or dangerous behaviors themselves. On the other hand, feeling emotional support from peers is linked to students’ pursuit of academic and socially responsible goals, such as helping others (Harter, 1996; Wentzel, 1994, 1998).

At this time, adolescents tend to identify and “try on” different social norms and styles they see reflected in different peer groups or cliques (Brown, 1990). As they move in and out of these groups, young adolescents are challenged to identify their personal values. They are eager to be and talk with others their age (Berndt, 1982), often about the social groups, situations, and values that they observe and experience.

For these reasons, early adolescence is an opportune time for school staff to structure students’ opportunities to think and talk with peers about social behaviors. Research suggests this may also be a good time to affect norms and values related to behavior, such as fighting and substance abuse, and to promote the attitudes associated with school success. Evaluation of a previous version of the *Second Step* middle school program showed that *Second Step* lessons were associated with changes in student attitudes about

aggression (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). Specifically, students who received lessons were less tolerant of aggression than students who did not. The *Second Step* students also reported it was easier for them to use social-emotional skills than did students in the comparison group. This provides evidence that adolescents can benefit from universal, classroom-based interventions, such as the *Second Step* program, that target the attitudes and skills that protect students and promote their success.

The Risk and Protective Factors Targeted by *Second Step* Lessons

Over the past several decades, researchers have identified factors in multiple areas of children’s and adolescents’ lives that increase their risk of problems and/or support their healthy development. Risk factors increase the likelihood that youth will experience problems or engage in problem behavior. In this way, risk factors take away from student success. Protective factors buffer youth from the effects of risk and improve their chances for success. Thus, protective factors add to student success. Protective factors may also prevent the onset of harmful behavior in the future.

Research on risk and protective factors has laid the groundwork for interventions that can simultaneously address multiple skill areas, reducing the need for a separate program for each concern (Coie et al., 1993; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001). Many of the same risk and protective factors are related to substance abuse, violence, delinquency, and school failure (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992).

The importance of 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* middle school program. Because this is a classroom-based program, we focused on the risk and protective factors best addressed in this venue. Factors targeted by classroom lessons include the following.

Protective factors:

- Social skills
- School connectedness
- Adoption of conventional norms about substance abuse

Risk factors:

- Inappropriate classroom behavior, such as aggression and impulsivity
- Favorable attitudes toward problem behaviors, 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

The check marks below each problem in the following chart show which risk and protective factors have been shown to affect that specific problem. For example, research has linked peer rejection to the likelihood of violence and aggression and substance abuse, but not low academic achievement.

Violence and Aggression
Substance Abuse
Low Academic Achievement
or School Dropout

How Risk and Protective Factors Affect Student Success

Protective Factors			
Social skills	✓	✓	
School connectedness	✓	✓	✓
Adoption of conventional norms about drug use		✓	
Risk Factors			
Inappropriate classroom behavior, such as aggression and impulsivity		✓	
Favorable attitudes toward problem behaviors	✓	✓	✓
Friends who engage in a problem behavior	✓	✓	✓
Early initiation of a problem behavior	✓	✓	✓
Peer rewards for antisocial behavior	✓	✓	
Peer rejection	✓	✓	
Impulsiveness	✓	✓	

Themes in the *Second Step* Middle School Program

Developmental considerations and the risk and protective factors listed before are addressed in five themes across the *Second Step* middle school program. These themes are: empathy and communication; bullying prevention; emotion management; problem solving, decision making, and goal setting; and substance abuse prevention. Although the themes are addressed in lessons that progress sequentially, they are also interwoven throughout lessons and across themes in each grade of the curriculum. In the following sections about program themes, the risk and protective factors addressed within each theme are in **boldface**.

Theme 1: Empathy and Communication

Empathy is related to social competence and academic success. Being able to identify, understand, and respond to how someone is feeling provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior, friendships, cooperation, coping, and conflict resolution. Research shows that young children with higher levels of empathy tend to be less aggressive, better liked, and more socially skilled, and to make greater academic gains than children with lower levels (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990; Izard, Fine, Schultz, Mostow, & Ackerman, 2001; Katsurada & Sugawara, 1998).

As children mature into adolescence, they develop an expanded self- and social awareness that includes a greater ability to understand and respond to what other people are feeling and an improved ability to see things from others' perspectives (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, & Hendrix, 1995). Youth with better perspective-taking skills are more likely to offer emotional support to others (Carlo, Knight, Eisenberg, & Rotenberg, 1991; Litvack-Miller, McDougall, & Romney, 1997), and adolescents with higher levels of empathy engage in more "helping" behaviors than do peers with less empathy (McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006).

These behaviors, in turn, are associated with higher grades and academic achievement (Wentzel, 1991, 1993). Students who develop these empathy and perspective-taking skills are also less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to peers (Kaukiainen et al., 1999).

Research shows that empathy skills can be taught successfully to adolescents using a social skills curriculum (Pecukonis, 1990). Practicing empathy and perspective taking includes understanding, recognizing, and responding to another person's feelings. These are also hallmarks of effective, respectful communication. In the *Second Step* program, students work together to learn how to listen and analyze situations in order to understand the perspectives of different people in a conflict or disagreement. These skills are complex and so critical that they are woven throughout the curriculum. In addition, students practice other communication skills, such as being assertive, that help them work successfully with others.

Having good **social skills**, such as those described above, protects youth from becoming involved in substance abuse, violence, and delinquency, and promotes academic success (see Wentzel, 1993). These skills also buffer students from the negative effects of these risk factors (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, & Baglioni, 2002). An improved ability to get along with classmates may lead to fewer **inappropriate classroom behaviors, such as aggression**, which should then decrease the likelihood of student involvement in substance abuse (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003). Improving students' abilities to interact skillfully with peers also reduces **peer rejection**, which is a risk factor for both drug use and violence (Arthur et al., 2002; Coie, Terry, Lenox, & Lochman, 1995). Finally, social skills are associated with greater academic success (Wentzel, 1993).

Social skills, such as empathy and communication, also facilitate positive relationships with school staff and peers (Wentzel & McNamara, 1999), which increase a student's sense of **school connectedness**.

School connectedness is defined as students' positive feelings toward school and going to school; in effect, the feeling that they have a sense of belonging there. School connectedness has been shown to protect students from a wide range of problem behaviors (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2002; Resnick, Bearman, Blum, & Bauman, 1997).

Theme 2: Bullying Prevention

Students' social skills and relations with peers are linked to both the likelihood and severity of bullying. Bullying is a pattern of aggressive behavior characterized by an imbalance of power and the intent to cause harm. It can be expressed directly or indirectly (Olweus, 1993). Research shows that bullying is a frequent and pervasive problem for many students, particularly in middle school (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Those who bully are more likely to engage in delinquent activities (Olweus, 1991), substance abuse (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, & Henderson, 2002), and dating violence (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). Being victimized by bullying is associated with poor school attendance (Slee, 1994) and academic performance (Schwartz & Gorman, 2003) as well as adjustment problems, such as depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Bystanders to bullying report feeling ill at ease (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Due to concerns about these and other school safety issues, states are increasingly adopting legislation to reduce and prevent bullying (Limber & Small, 2003).

Lack of **social skills** (Olweus, 1993) and social support from peers (Demaray & Malecki, 2003) increase a student's risk of being bullied. Although being disliked by peers significantly increases a student's risk of being bullied (Hodges & Perry, 1997), friendships play an important role in preventing bullying and helping youth cope. Students who have at least one friend are less likely to be victimized, and among those victimized, those who have a good friend experience fewer subsequent emotional and behavioral problems (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999).

Social skills also affect how students respond to bullying, which in turn can affect the extent to which they are victimized in the future. Research shows that responding aggressively to bullying can cause victimization to last longer or escalate (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). On the other hand, being passive and failing to defend or assert oneself is associated with being targeted for bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Students who are able to use socially skilled responses to bullying, such as assertively and appropriately standing up for themselves, are those most likely to succeed at ending the mistreatment (Wilton et al., 2000).

Bullying is a group phenomenon that nearly always involves peers (Olweus, 1993). Students tend to look to others for cues about how to respond when they witness bullying (Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997). The actions of the students who are bystanders to bullying can have a powerful effect. Unfortunately, many of the ways that students respond make bullying situations worse; for example, standing around and watching or laughing encourages and prolongs bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Salmivalli et al., 1997). However, when bystanders intervene appropriately, bullying tends to stop (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). This suggests that teaching skills and influencing norms about bystander behavior may be effective prevention pathways. In fact, research shows that prevention efforts can reduce the bystander behaviors that support and perpetuate bullying and also increase students' sense of responsibility to help those who are victimized (Frey et al., 2005).

Two risk factors that are especially salient to bullying are **favorable attitudes** and **peer rewards**. Based on recommendations from experts in bullying prevention research, the *Second Step* program includes a focus on changing peer group attitudes, behaviors, and norms about bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1995). Developing students' perspective-taking skills and empathy for students who are bullied are vital steps in that

direction. In the bullying lessons, students increase their awareness of the range of behaviors that make up bullying, such as gossip and social exclusion, sexual harassment, and cyber bullying. They also gain an understanding of their responsibilities as bystanders. By learning the ways that bystanders can be “part of the solution,” students help **reduce the social rewards** for bullying, increase support available to students who are bullied, reduce **peer rejection**, and change the culture of their classroom and school.

Theme 3: Emotion Management

Youth who have difficulties managing their emotions are more likely to be involved in aggression and substance abuse (Brady, Myrick, & McElroy, 1998; Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992; Vitaro, Ferland, Jacques, & Ladouceur, 1998) and experience difficulty behaving in **socially skilled** ways (Eisenberg et al., 1997). Students with poor emotion management skills are also prone to act **impulsively** on their emotions rather than using problem-solving skills, such as analyzing situations, anticipating consequences, and planning (Donohew et al., 2000; Simons, Carey, & Gaher, 2004).

Research shows that children and adolescents can learn a variety of cognitive-behavioral strategies to manage their emotions (Nelson & Finch, 2000) and cope with stressful situations. For example, they may learn techniques to distract themselves, relax, or deliberately alter their thoughts and “self-talk” about a situation. Research shows that preadolescents can benefit from universal, school-based interventions that model and teach these kinds of coping strategies (Cunningham, Brandon, & Frydenberg, 2002). Aggressive youth who receive instruction in emotion-management strategies have also been shown to reduce their aggressive behaviors and the likelihood that they will abuse alcohol and other drugs in the future (Lochman, Burch, Curry, & Lampron, 1984; Lochman, 1992). Together, these findings suggest that teaching students to recognize strong feelings and use positive self-talk and other stress-reducing strategies to “stay in control” are

effective ways to increase coping and reduce aggression and other problem behaviors, in both the immediate and the long term.

Emotion-management lessons in the *Second Step* program emphasize coping with situations that provoke strong feelings. Students are taught proactive strategies, such as deep, centered breathing and positive self-talk, to prevent negative feelings from escalating into negative behavior. When students use self-directed language, they may be more likely to think about a situation before responding, rather than acting on their first **impulse**. The ability to keep from escalating the situation and responding emotionally allows students the chance to employ many of the other skills taught in the program, such as effective communication, assertiveness, negotiation and compromise, and problem solving.

Skill at managing strong emotions besides anger, such as embarrassment, anxiety, fear, and jealousy, can improve students’ ability to get along with peers and make good choices. Students being bullied can use self-talk and other calming strategies to avoid crying, retaliating, or responding in other ways likely to mark them as easy targets for continued victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Schwartz et al., 1993). Youth who struggle with anxiety, and are thus more likely to lack effective coping skills and misperceive situations as threatening (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999), may also benefit from *Second Step* lessons on coping with stress.

Finally, *Second Step* lessons encourage students to use and increase a vocabulary of feelings. Research undertaken with affective education programs has shown that children’s verbal fluency in labeling and discussing emotions can be increased, and that such gains are linked to improved self-control and interpersonal problem solving (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995).

Theme 4: Action Steps for Problem Solving, Decision Making, and Goal Setting

Action Steps are social-cognitive skills taught across all three grades of the *Second Step* program. In sixth grade, they are taught as steps for solving interpersonal and other problems. In seventh grade, the Action Steps are taught as tools for decision making. In eighth grade, students use the Action Steps to improve their goal-setting abilities. In all three grades, students' ability to effectively carry out the cognitive process involved in the Action Steps requires using emotion-management skills learned in earlier lessons, especially for stressful situations (Elias & Kress, 1994).

Problem solving: Aggressive youth have been shown to have difficulty solving interpersonal problems (Dodge & Frame, 1982). They tend to jump to conclusions and have trouble understanding social situations, often assuming others have hostile intentions (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Typically, they come up with fewer and more aggressive ideas about how to handle conflicts (Rubin, Bream, & Rose-Krasnor, 1991). Students who are common targets of aggression and bullying often have these **social skills** deficits as well (Olweus, 1993).

Research shows that students' social problem-solving skills can be improved (Denham & Almeida, 1987) and that teaching these skills prevents violence and other problems that affect the success of youth (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998; Tolan & Guerra, 1994). The Action Steps in the *Second Step* program, adapted from cognitive-behavioral research based on a social information-processing model (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Spivack & Shure, 1974), are designed to build students' ability to handle interpersonal conflicts. Students practice examining and defining problems as opposed to jumping to quick conclusions. They also learn to describe a problem in neutral terms rather than using a negative or blaming frame. The next step, brainstorming solutions, teaches students to think through options in order to generate multiple ideas. Then they practice evaluating the options using questions designed to help them analyze and consider potential consequences of

their actions. Finally, lessons provide students with exercises to help them think through and carry out solutions, improving planning skills in the process.

Decision making: As children grow into adolescence, their desire to make decisions in their lives increases (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). They also encounter more choices involving risky outcomes. Although students' ability to make thoughtful choices improves during this stage of development, their decision making is typically less skilled when choices involve values, emotions, and social pressures (Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002). In fact, conformity to peer pressure peaks around this time (Berndt, 1979). For these reasons, early adolescence is a particularly important time for teaching decision-making skills to students in order to prevent involvement in substance abuse (Bosworth, 1997) and other problem behaviors.

In seventh grade, the *Second Step* program teaches students how to use the Action Steps to increase their decision-making skills. Having already learned the steps in the context of problem solving in sixth grade, students now use the steps to brainstorm, think through, and clarify decisions; evaluate the consequences of the decisions they are contemplating; and plan steps to carry out their choices. Then they practice checking to see how a choice is working and renew the process or revisit their decision as necessary.

Goal setting: Learning how to set and pursue appropriate goals is an important task in early adolescence. Student goal-setting ability is related to self-regulation and sense of self-efficacy, both strong predictors of student success (Covington, 2000). Conversely, difficulty with setting appropriate goals and figuring out how to achieve them are linked to developmental difficulties (Bandura, 1977). The Action Steps in the *Second Step* program provide a solid template for goal-setting. Students clarify a situation and identify their goal, brainstorm ways to work to achieve it, evaluate and choose the best approach, then set their plan into motion and monitor their progress.

Effective goal setting involves learning how to set appropriate goals that are specific and clearly defined, short-term, and challenging but achievable (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). When students set and pursue goals with these qualities, it is easier for them to measure their progress and experience success. This leads to enhanced motivation, increased self-efficacy, and a keener interest in what they are pursuing (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). In addition, effective goal setting supports student academic achievement (Covington, 2000). When students focus on achieving a goal in the spirit of self-determination, as opposed to comparison or performance for others, they gain self-mastery. Academic goals oriented toward mastery rather than performance have been shown to increase students' academic performance and their sense of **school connectedness** (Kumar, Gheen, & Kaplan, 2002).

Students also learn to use the tools and activities in the *Second Step* program to set appropriate social goals. Social goals function much like goals in other arenas, helping students organize and direct their efforts (Covington, 2000). Aggressive youth are likely to have goals that are hostile or controlling (Erdley & Asher, 1996, 1999) which, in turn, predict substance abuse and **peer rejection** (Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993). In contrast, students who try to achieve prosocial goals, like making friends and getting along with others, are more liked and respected by peers (Wentzel, 1994) and tend to have more friends (Rose & Asher, 1999). An evaluation of the *Second Step* program in elementary school has shown that children who received the program had more prosocial goals when resolving conflicts over resources than students who did not receive the program (Frey, Nolen, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005).

Theme 5: Substance Abuse Prevention

The middle school years are a peak time for substance abuse initiation (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005). Thus, reducing **early initiation**, a major risk factor for later problems (Hawkins et al., 1997), is a primary program goal. The risk and

protective factors for abuse of alcohol and other substances are addressed across lessons throughout the *Second Step* program, as well as by specific lessons targeting drug and alcohol use. In line with research about the best school-based approaches to prevent and reduce youth problems in this arena (Griffin, 2003), *Second Step* substance abuse lessons focus on providing accurate information and building on the social and personal skills addressed in previous lessons, including the skills to recognize and resist problematic choices.

Students' risk of substance abuse is strongly affected by their **attitudes toward alcohol and other drugs** (Hawkins et al., 1997), including their perception of the harmfulness of alcohol and other drugs and their perceptions of how many other students are using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. There is substantial evidence that providing information about the physical consequences of drug use corresponds to reduced use (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1996). Thus, *Second Step* lessons provide students with accurate information about the negative health consequences of using alcohol and other drugs. Additionally, lessons raise questions about negative social consequences, having students consider how their use of alcohol and other substances might potentially affect family members and other important people in their lives.

Students' attitudes toward alcohol and other drugs are also affected by what they believe about the attitudes and behavior of other youth (perceived social norms). The more students believe that their peers hold positive attitudes toward and use alcohol and other drugs, the higher their own risk of using. Yet research has shown that students consistently overestimate their peers' support for and use of alcohol and other drugs (D'Amico et al., 2001; Perkins & Craig, 2003). Studies show that targeting normative perceptions among middle school youth has reduced initiation and the continuing use of substances (D'Amico & Orlando, 2005; Ellickson, McCaffrey, Ghosh-Dastidar, & Longshore, 2003). Thus, *Second Step* lessons also address students' normative beliefs.

Specifically, substance abuse lessons include activities and information designed to correct misperceptions and reinforce the attitudes that most students hold. Lessons also help students learn how to provide each other with positive peer pressure to actively support each other in not using alcohol and other drugs. Finally, students develop commitment statements to not use substances and are encouraged to share these with important adults in their lives.

From studies of adolescent development, we know that students in the middle school grades can make poor decisions, in part because they do not fully think through both the short- and long-term consequences of their actions. To help early adolescents think ahead, plan, and work to achieve their goals, the substance abuse lessons include activities in which students consider how using substances might influence their goals and the lives they want to have in the future. Students are less likely to use if they see alcohol and other drugs interfering with the lifestyle they want for themselves (Hansen, 1996). These lessons should serve to help students **adopt conventional norms about alcohol and other drug use**, which protect students (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1997). Students may also make poor decisions because they are affected by peer pressure, which peaks during early adolescence (Berndt, 1979). Assertiveness and problem-solving skills taught throughout the curriculum provide students with the resistance training and other skills they need to handle direct pressure to engage in risky and unsafe behaviors, such as substance use.

Strengthening students' **social skills** should help students avoid **aggressive and impulsive behavior in the classroom** and form healthy relationships with peers. During *Second Step* lessons, working cooperatively with classmates they may not have known previously may also build new social connections. In sum, the combination of improved skills, building new friendships, and enhancing school connectedness can help students reduce the risk factor of having **friends who use alcohol and other drugs** (Hawkins et al., 1992).

Instructional practices to support program goals

The *Second Step* program uses a variety of group and interactive activities to help students gain new knowledge and skills. Research shows that an overreliance on one-way, teacher-led communication is ineffective (Evans & Bosworth, 1997), and successful prevention curricula include interactive and engaging teaching techniques, such as discussions, group activities, and role-plays (Tobler & Stratton, 1997).

A conceptual framework that informed development of the *Second Step* program is Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Research in this area shows that children learn new skills best through teaching, observation, rehearsal, and feedback, all in the context of social interaction and small-group activities, and that this approach is effective for skill-building programs (Bosworth & Sailes, 1993; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 1998; Ladd & Mize, 1983). In the *Second Step* program, interactive approaches provide students with modeling, motivation, skill practice, and feedback.

The group and partner activities in the *Second Step* program are also included for their effect on students' peer relations. Students involved in group activities develop more trust in each other (Nadler & Luckner, 1992). Research suggests that students can work cooperatively with peers to create a normative peer structure that supports healthy choices, and that this approach can help high-risk youth connect to prosocial norms (Wodarski & Feit, 1997). Group work can increase skill acquisition by allowing students to practice new skills in an environment of positive peer support (Hansen, Nangle, & Kathryn, 1998). Research on a wide variety of cooperative learning strategies has shown that group work increases student empathy and social skills; increases students' acceptance of other students' ethnic, racial, and physical diversity; and helps students who otherwise might be rejected to be seen as contributing class members (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990).

In addition to a focus on peer interaction, the *Second Step* program provides opportunities for teachers to interact with students in ways that promote healthy relationships and school connectedness. By listening and sharing with students in the context of program lessons, teachers can counteract the perception among middle school students that teachers do not care about them (Wentzel, 1997) and the issues that are on their minds.

Teachers can also be powerful role models for the skills discussed and practiced in the program. For example, a teacher might model positive self-talk and managing difficult feelings in the context of a hard day in the classroom. This provides students with information about how strategies “look” when used in real life. In the context of real events, teachers can also provide students with feedback and coaching in skill use, for example, by cueing them to use active listening skills when solving a conflict. Finally, teachers can promote acquisition of program skills by seeking student input when making decisions. Students view teachers who use democratic practices as caring (Wentzel, 1997) and are more likely to value prosocial goals in these classrooms (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). These teacher behaviors—modeling, cueing and coaching, and creation of opportunities for input—support the generalization of program skills to real life (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994), which is the ultimate goal of prevention programming.

Conclusion: Student Success in School and Beyond

Schools are increasingly tasked with meeting a broad range of student needs, especially during the middle school years. Fortunately, research shows that universal prevention efforts focused on social and personal skill development can address factors that protect young adolescents and also promote their success.

Informed by developmental theory and a risk and protective factors framework, classroom lessons in the *Second Step* middle school program address themes such as empathy, communication, and bullying prevention. The lessons aim to prevent and reduce risk factors, such as aggression, peer rejection, and early initiation of substance abuse. They are also intended to increase protective factors, such as social skills and school connectedness. Using high-interest, interactive lessons, this universal, classroom-based program addresses the core competencies and problematic behaviors that have been shown to affect student’s success in school and throughout their lives.

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