Conflict Resolution/Interpersonal Skills

Anger and its expression have become a major public health problem for school-age children and adolescents (Blake and Hamrin 2007; Boxer et al. 2005; Hahn et al. 2007). Bullying, gangs, substance use, as well as psychological, physical, and sexual abuse on dates are among the threats that youth face today. Efforts to address these concerns by promoting conflict resolution skills and general social competence are reflected in the large numbers of programs geared to children and youth (Blake and Hamrin 2007). Of particular interest are school-based programs designed to be delivered to all students (Wilson and Lipsey 2007).

These programs are typically designed with the overall goal of changing the mental processes and interpersonal behavioral strategies that lead young people to engage in problem behaviors such as violence, aggression, delinquency, risky sexual activity, and alcohol and drug use. Specific skills targeted include promoting anger management and conflict resolution to stem aggression (verbal and physical) and teaching social resistance training to stem substance use and other risky behaviors. While the specific program objectives often emphasize reducing problem behaviors, the programs have the added benefits of promoting caring and cooperative behavior, teaching prosocial life skills, and promoting positive climates for learning in the school and living in the home and community.

These programs include universal programs that are delivered to children and youth in school, youth social/recreational programs, and parent training classes. In some cases, the programs are delivered as community-based programs. More targeted programs include those for children and youth in specific circumstances such as families experiencing divorce and families with a noncompliant child.

Conflict Resolution

While many programs aimed at reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviors feature conflict resolution strategies, Garrand and Lipsey (2007) indicate that conflict resolution education programs per se are designed to specifically facilitate constructive resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

Conflict resolution programs emerged from a variety of intervention programs begun during the 1960s, when peace advocates and community mediation groups introduced alternative dispute methods. According to Garrard and Lipsey (2007), conflict resolution programs—distinct from other antibullying, character education, social skills training, or violence- or aggression-prevention programs—are delivered in three different formats: direct skills instruction, peer mediation, or embedded curricula.

Direct skills instruction includes activities that provide students with explicit information on conflict resolution skills and ample opportunities to rehearse them. Peer mediation includes training in

conflict resolution for a subgroup of students who use a prescribed process to assist other students in resolution of disputes. Embedded curricula teach conflict resolution concepts and strategies during traditional classroom discussions of literature, history, and the like.

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills training programs address a wide array of competencies targeted to assist young people in initiating and maintaining positive affiliations. The types of social skills targeted include problem solving, decision-making and communication skills, and social resistance skills. Social resistance training typically concentrates on teaching social decision-making and problem-solving skills regarding the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. This training is aimed at helping youth identify social persuasion techniques and respond more effectively to social influences to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Specifically, youngsters learn and practice how to turn persuasion tactics around for prosocial aims. Many substance use–prevention experts agree that competencies such as resistance skills are essential protective factors for the reduction and prevention of substance use in adolescence (Dusenbury and Falco 1995). Social resistance training also has implications for risky sexual behavior and risky driving among high school students (Botvin, Griffin, and Nichols 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Programs that promote conflict resolution and interpersonal skills, especially those designed for use in schools, are based on multiple theoretical approaches (Hahn et al. 2007). Based on the theory of behavior changes being used, the program may concentrate on individuals, interpersonal relations, the physical and social environment (including social norms), or combinations of these (Hahn et al. 2007). Additionally, a few ecologically based programs that attempt to build a culture that models and reinforces prosocial behavior emphasize changing the cultural context rather than the behaviors of individuals (Mattaini and McGuire 2006). These ecological programs are often delivered along with components or programs that are based on individual behavior change. Cognitive–behavioral techniques are the most widely studied treatments for anger and aggression in youth (Blake and Hamrin 2007). Programs based on a social-cognitive approach concentrate on perceptual biases, problem-solving skills, and social/moral beliefs (Boxer et al. 2005) and are adapted to the developmental level of the children and youths intended for the program.

Outcome Evidence

The large number of meta-analyses of studies of conflict resolution and interpersonal skills programs reflects a general concern for documenting the outcomes of these programs. Programs that use cognitive–behavioral and skill-based approaches are the most empirically validated programs (Blake and Hamrin 2007). School-based programs have been the most widely researched. One analysis of 249 articles on school-based prosocial programs for aggressive and disruptive behaviors found that, overall, the school-based programs generally have positive effects (Wilson and Lipsey 2007). This was true whether the program was delivered to all students in a classroom or school or targeted for students demonstrating aggressive or disruptive behaviors. A cognitively oriented approach was most often used, but some programs used behavioral social skills or counseling treatment approaches. Programs resulted in a decrease in aggressive and disruptive behaviors. Another meta-analysis of universal school-based programs (Hahn et al. 2007) based on various theoretical approaches also found that, in general, the programs were associated with decreased violence and increased social behaviors, including reductions in drug abuse and delinquency and improvements in school attendance and achievement. Positive results were found for all school levels and across different populations. Mytton and colleagues (2009) conducted a review of 56 randomized trials of school-based violence-prevention programs for children identified as aggressive or at high risk of being

aggressive and found positive effects in significantly reducing aggressive behavior and school or agency disciplinary actions in response to aggressive behavior for intervention youths, when compared with the control group.

A review of outcomes for conflict resolution programs (Garrard and Lipsey 2007) included 36 studies conducted between 1960 and 2006 (Garrard and Lipsey 2007). Positive changes in antisocial behavior were consistently observed regardless of whether the students were exposed to direct conflict resolution skills instruction, embedded conflict resolution curricula, or some form of peer mediation. Considerably larger effects were found for older students with relatively small effects for students 9 and younger. Most of the positive effects on reducing antisocial behavior were present in programs providing a total of 15 or fewer hours of participation. One other review of studies of social skills programs also found that the programs had a small but robust positive effect, especially for well-implemented cognitive–behavioral programs targeting high-risk youth (Lösel and Beelmann 2003).

Although numerous studies have documented positive results from various conflict resolution and interpersonal skills programs, researchers caution that results tended to be more positive for the well-implemented programs (Wilson and Lipsey 2007). Researchers also called for additional rigorous studies to determine the effects of program characteristics and settings on outcomes as well as the variations in effectiveness for various population and ages of children and youth.

Following are some examples of evaluation results for several conflict resolution and interpersonal skills programs:

- *Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP).* Farrell, Meyer, and White (2001) evaluated RIPP, a sixth-grade universal violence prevention program, and found fewer disciplinary violations for violent offenses and in-school suspensions at posttest compared with the control group. The reduction in suspensions was maintained at 12-month follow-up for boys but not for girls.

- *Second Step.* Cooke and colleagues (2007) studied this program, which teaches youth to recognize anger cues and use stress-reduction techniques to inhibit impulsive responses, and found significant improvements in positive approach–coping, caring–cooperative behavior, suppression of aggression, and consideration of others, but no changes in aggressive–antisocial behaviors. Additionally, behavioral observations and disciplinary referrals showed no significant changes.

- *The Good Behavior Game.* Embry (2002) reports that about 20 independent replications have been completed of this program, which uses applied behavior management strategies to help young children manage their own and their teammates' maladaptive and adaptive behaviors. These programs conducted in various settings (and some with long-term follow-up) resulted in a positive impact on impulsive, disruptive behaviors of children and teens as well as reductions in substance use or serious antisocial behaviors.

- *Life Skills Training.* Botvin, Griffin, and Nichols (2006) reported results from a study of this substance use–prevention program, which teaches students a variety of cognitive–behavioral skills for problem-solving and decision-making, resisting media influences, managing stress and anxiety, communicating effectively, developing healthy personal relationships, and asserting one's rights. The study found that the program—which was previously found to be effective in preventing tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use—resulted in youth reports that they

were less likely to engage in physical fighting or delinquent behavior than they had reported earlier. Additionally, students who received at least half of the Life Skills Training program were significantly less likely to engage in verbal aggression, physical aggression, fighting, and delinquency than students in the control condition were.

- *Steps to Respect.* Frey and colleagues (2005) evaluated this program, which provides skill and literature-based lessons to third through sixth graders over several months, and found that intervention students reported significantly less acceptance of bullying/aggression, felt more responsible to intervene with friends who were bullied than did students in the control schools, and reported less victimization at the posttest than did those in the control group. There were, however, no differences in direct or indirect aggression in self-reported behavior and teacher ratings of interaction skills. Observations of playground behavior revealed declines in bullying and argumentative behavior among the intervention students, when compared with the control group.

References

Blake, Christie S., and Vanya Hamrin. 2007. "Current Approaches to the Assessment and Management of Anger and Aggression in Youth: A Review." *Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 20(4):209–21.

Botvin, Gilbert J., Kenneth W. Griffin, and Tracy Diaz Nichols. 2006. "Preventing Youth Violence and Delinquency Through a Universal School-Based Prevention Approach." *Prevention Science: The Official Journal of the Society for Prevention Research* 7(4):403–08.

Boxer, Paul, Sara E. Goldstein, Dara Musher–Eizenman, Eric F. Dubow, and Donna M.L. Heretick. 2005. "Developmental Issues in School-Based Aggression Prevention From a Social-Cognitive Perspective." *Journal of Primary Prevention* 26(5):383–400.

Cooke, Michelle Beaulieu, Julian Ford, Joan Levine, Cate Bourke, Lisa Newell, and Garry Lapidus. 2007. "The Effects of Citywide Implementation of 'Second Step' on Elementary School Students' Prosocial and Aggressive Behaviors." *Journal of Primary Prevention* 28(2):93–115.

Dusenbury, Linda, and Mathea Falco. 1995. "Eleven Components of Effective Drug Abuse Prevention Curricula." *Journal of School Health* 65:420–25.

Embry, Dennis D. 2002. "The Good Behavior Game: A Best Practice Candidate as a Universal Behavioral Vaccine." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 5(4):273–97.

Farrell, Albert D., Aleta Lynn Meyer, and Kamila S. White. 2001. "Evaluation of Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP): A School-Based Prevention Program for Reducing Violence Among Urban Adolescents." Journal of Clinical Child Psychology 30(4):451–63.

Frey, Karin S., Miriam K. Hirschstein, Jennie L. Snell, Leihua Van Schoiack–Edstrom, Elizabeth P. MacKenzie, and Carole J. Broderick. 2005. "Reducing Playground Bullying and Supporting Beliefs: An Experimental Trial of the Steps to Respect Program." *Developmental Psychology* 41(3):479–90.

Garrard, Wendy M., and Mark W Lipsey. 2007. "Conflict Resolution Education and Antisocial Behavior in U.S. Schools: A Meta-Analysis." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 25(1):9–38.

Hahn, Robert A., Dawna Fuqua–Whitley, Holly Wethington, Jessica Lowy, Alex Crosby, Mindy T. Fullilove, Robert Johnson, Akiva Liberman, Eve K. Moscicki, LeShawndra Price, Susan Snyder, Farris Tuma, Stella Cory, Glenda Stone, Kaushik Mukhopadhaya, Sajal Chattopadhyay, and Linda L. Dahlberg. 2007. "Effectiveness of Universal School-Based Programs to Prevent Violent and Aggressive Behavior." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 33(2S):S114–29.

Lösel, Friedrich, and Andreas Beelmann. 2003. "Effects of Child Skills Training in Preventing Antisocial Behavior: A Systematic Review of Randomized Evaluations." *Annals of the American Academy* 587:84–109.

Mattaini, Mark A., and Melissa S. McGuire. 2006. "Behavioral Strategies for Construction Nonviolent Cultures With Youth: A Review." *Behavior Modification* 30:184–224.

Mytton, Julie A., Carolyn DiGuiseppi, David A. Gough, Rod S. Taylor, and Stuart Logan. 2009. "School-Based Secondary Prevention Programs for Preventing Violence." *The Cochrane Library* 4.

Wilson, Sandra Jo, and Mark W. Lipsey. 2007. "School-Based Interventions for Aggressive and Disruptive Behavior." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 33(2S):S130–43.