



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Middle School Program

Introduction

The primary goal of the Second Step Middle School Program is to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and mindsets that will help them successfully navigate adolescence. Early adolescence is a time when students' cognitive capacities, including abstract thinking and moral reasoning, increase (Steinberg, 2007). During this developmental period, students are primed to be especially sensitive to their peers and experience an increased intensity of emotions (Steinberg, 2007). This sometimes-volatile combination can result in peer conflicts that disrupt the educational environment, interfere with learning, and cause emotional distress. The Second Step Middle School Program helps students learn the skills, knowledge, and mindsets they need to handle strong emotions, better understand and connect with their peers, and avoid and resolve conflicts. In addition, the program supports social connectedness and promotes a growth mindset (the belief that intelligence can be developed). Together these skills and mindsets contribute to positive classroom and school climates that serve as the foundation for academic and social success.

Social Connectedness

The Second Step Middle School Program aims to strengthen social connectedness through social belonging lessons at the start of middle school (in Grade 6 or 7) and then again in Grade 8 to help prepare students for the transition to high school. Feeling a sense of social connectedness is a fundamental human need (Walton et al., 2012) and an important contributor to students' school success. Having a greater feeling of social connectedness increases academic achievement

(Walton & Cohen, 2011), and when social connectedness is threatened, students can suffer academically (Baumeister et al., 2002). The Second Step Middle School lessons are designed to improve students' subjective sense of social connection by helping them form positive, helpful interpretations of common middle school and high school social challenges (Walton, 2014). It's important to support students' sense of belonging at school, especially when they encounter common social difficulties in a new school environment (Walton & Cohen, 2011). The social belonging lessons normalize common social difficulties by helping students understand that social challenges when entering a new school are temporary and usually get better, in part through help and support from other students and staff (Walton et al., 2012).

Growth Mindset

A mindset is a person's beliefs about whether his or her abilities or characteristics are fixed, set, and unchangeable (fixed mindset), or malleable and capable of changing over time depending on circumstances and effort (growth mindset). Research on mindsets has focused on the effects of having a fixed (or entity) versus a growth (or incremental) mindset (Yeager et al., 2013). A growth mindset has been shown to create an internal "psychological world" that promotes resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Second Step targets growth mindset in two areas: intelligence (or the ability to do well in school) and personality.

Interventions to promote a growth mindset about intelligence and academic achievement have been shown to improve grades overall and increase the percentage

of at-risk students who pass their classes (Dweck et al., 2011). Second Step content targeting intelligence growth mindset is based closely on an intervention developed at Stanford University that was shown to be effective (Miu & Yeager, 2015). When students believe their intelligence and ability to do well in school are malleable and can grow and change based on experience and effort, their school-related behavior improves. Having a growth mindset about intelligence can improve students' academic goals (they believe they can learn instead of thinking they're unintelligent), attitudes toward effort in school (they believe trying hard creates success instead of believing they're incapable), and responses to setbacks and difficulties (they try new strategies and work harder instead of giving up) (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Students can also have a growth or fixed mindset about their own personalities, as well as the personalities of others (Dweck et al., 2011; Miu & Yeager, 2015). When students have a fixed mindset about personality, they believe who people are and how they act is set and doesn't change; this belief can strongly affect how they respond to peer conflicts and difficulties (Miu & Yeager, 2015). Students with a fixed personality mindset are more likely to see the behaviors of their peers as resulting from how they "really are" (qualities that won't change over time). They're also more likely to believe that when others hurt or offend them, they do it on purpose. This is known as having a hostile attribution bias. Believing others' personalities are fixed can increase students' desire for revenge in conflict situations (Yeager et al., 2011). Finally, having a fixed mindset about their own personality means students feel slights and insults more deeply, increasing the negative effects of bullying and peer rejection and exclusion. Having a growth mindset about their own personalities and the personalities of others has been shown to reduce depression and improve how students respond to social exclusion and peer hostility (Miu & Yeager, 2015).

Goal Setting and Implementation Intentions

Setting goals is important, but those goals need to be specific and actionable. Having specific and actionable implementation intentions helps people accomplish goals (Gallo & Gollwitzer, 2007). In the Second Step Middle School Program, students are taught to form implementation intentions by creating If-Then Plans, in which the "If" is a specific cue they expect to encounter and the "Then" is the action they want to carry out. Setting an implementation intention helps students be specific about what they want to do. It also helps them carry out that action by linking it to a specific cue—something concrete that can prompt them to act. Implementation intentions facilitate the goal achievement beyond goal-setting by itself (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Implementation intentions make it easier for students to follow through on a plan (Bargh et al., 2010). They're powerful in part because they help students make positive actions more automatic, reducing the need for willpower and self-control (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Using the If-Then Plan, students can think about challenging situations they're likely to encounter and make a thoughtful plan ahead of time about how to respond. Setting the implementation intention creates a mental association between the cue (the "If" situation they might encounter) and the action (the "Then" action they'll take in response). As a result, the cue serves as a prompt for the student to carry out the planned action. This process makes doing the action more like a habit than a conscious effort.

Implementation intentions are fairly simple, and they have been shown to be just as effective with difficult goals as with easy goals (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). In addition, implementation intentions are especially effective for students with self-regulation challenges (Bargh et al., 2010). Across multiple Second Step lessons, students are prompted to form implementation intentions to help them carry out plans and accomplish goals they develop for themselves. Self-generated plans are important



because implementation intentions are more effective for intrinsically motivated goals than extrinsically motivated goals (Gawrilow & Gollwitzer, 2008).

Identifying Interests and Values

When students set goals focused on developing competence, known as mastery goals, they demonstrate greater motivation and effort, adaptive learning strategies, and better learning outcomes (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016; Senko, 2016). Goal-setting and growth mindset are complementary approaches to helping students identify interests and areas for personal growth, as well as develop strong work habits. These concepts are addressed across all grades in the program.

As students begin to enter mid-adolescence in Grade 8, the Second Step Middle School Program introduces identity and values. Identity development is the process through which individuals become able to answer the question, "Who am I?" and is the hallmark of social development in adolescence. This process is also heavily influenced by identifying and challenging personal values. Reflecting on their values helps students feel more socially connected and prosocial, or inclined to want to help others. This effect is strongest for youth who struggle with behavior problems (Thomaes et al., 2009). Spending time focusing on their values can help students lower stress and reduce their likelihood of stereotyping peers (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), as well as support their ability to manage their emotions (Tamir & Mauss, 2011). There's also evidence that providing opportunities for students to reflect on sources of self-worth or connect their personal values to academic tasks can increase motivation, engagement, and achievement (Bowen et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2009; Harackiewicz & Prinski, 2018).

Emotion Management

Youth who have difficulties managing their emotions are more likely to be involved in aggression and substance abuse (Brady et al., 1998; Hessler & Katz, 2010; Vitaro et al., 1998; Wills et al., 2006) and have a harder time behaving in socially skilled ways (Spinrad et al., 2006). Students with poor emotion-management skills are also

prone to acting impulsively on their emotions rather than using problem-solving skills, such as analyzing situations, anticipating consequences, and planning (Donohew et al., 2000; Simons et al., 2004). Better emotion management helps students cope with problems in more effective ways (Zalewski, et al., 2011).

Emotional awareness and knowledge contribute to positive youth development. The Second Step Middle School Program teaches students to notice their emotions and reflect on the actions their emotions influence. Greater emotion knowledge improves social competence and decreases both internalizing and externalizing problems (Trentacosta & Fine, 2010).

Children and adolescents can learn a variety of strategies to manage and cope with stressful situations (Metz et al., 2013; Wyman et al., 2010) including learning techniques to distract themselves, relax, or deliberately alter their thoughts and practice positive self-talk in an emotional situation. Teaching students to recognize strong feelings and use positive strategies to stay in control are effective ways to increase coping and reduce aggression and other problem behaviors in both the short and long term.

The Second Step Middle School emotion-management lessons emphasize coping effectively 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. The ability to keep from responding emotionally enables students to employ many of the other skills taught in the program, such as perspective-taking and problem-solving.

In addition to more traditional emotion-management and calming-down strategies, the Second Step Middle School Program helps students learn to be more aware of their emotions without having to act on them. These strategies help students experience unpleasant emotions in a healthy way; trying to avoid negative emotions can have the undesired results of increasing emotional difficulties (Hayes & Wilson, 1994; Plumb et al., 2004; Shahar & Herr, 2011; Shallcross et al., 2010). Practicing

noticing emotions without immediately acting on them helps students gain impulse control and step back from emotional experiences in ways that can increase their ability to choose how to respond, rather than simply reacting to situations (Hayes et al., 2012; Teasdale et al., 2002).

Consciously practicing emotion-management techniques, like slow breathing and counting, can result in more automatic use of those strategies and techniques (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Implementation intentions (plans to take an action toward a goal when prompted by a specific cue) can also be used to make positive responses to strong emotions more automatic (Eder, 2011; Gallo et al., 2009). Emotionally challenging situations for middle school students often involve peers and require students to respond quickly to their own emotions and others' provocations. Stress during conflict can make it difficult for middle school students to think clearly. Therefore, consciously practicing emotion-management strategies so they become automatic is helpful for when those situations arise. If emotion-management strategies like slow breathing and counting are automatic, it's more likely that students will be able to use them when faced with stressful situations (Williams et al., 2009). Planning ahead and forming implementation intentions for how to respond to powerful emotions and emotionally charged interactions can help students react to emotional situations quickly and effectively (Hopp et al., 2011; Webb et al., 2012).

Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Being able to identify, understand, and respond in a caring way to how someone is feeling provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior, friendships, and conflict resolution (Batanova & Loukas, 2014). As children mature into adolescence, they develop a greater ability to understand and respond to what other people are feeling and an improved ability to see things from others' perspectives.

Youth with better perspective-taking skills are more likely to offer emotional support to others (Litvack-Miller et

al., 1997), and adolescents with more empathy report behaving more helpfully than their peers (McMahon, et al., 2006). Youth who develop these empathy and perspective-taking skills are also less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to their peers (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). In general, empathy reduces aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (McDonald & Messinger, 2011; Roberts et al., 2014; Salmivalli, 2010).

Aggression is fueled in part by a hostile attribution bias (Dodge et al., 2006; Yeager et al., 2013). This is the tendency to assume peers have hostile intent, particularly in ambiguous situations (Arsenio, et al., 2009). When students develop and use perspective-taking skills, it can help them see others' intentions more accurately, potentially reducing hostile attributions (Van Cleemput, et al., 2014).

Experiencing others' suffering can sometimes result in empathic distress, the inability to cope with the perceived pain of another (FeldmanHall, et al., 2015). This can motivate adolescents to focus more on escaping the feelings than helping the person in need. Second Step lessons are intended to help students be more aware of and able to tolerate difficult emotions, which helps to strengthen the likelihood that empathy and perspective-taking will result in compassionate action.

Values also serve an important role in strengthening the link between perspective-taking and positive actions toward peers. When students have a commitment to showing care and concern for others and treating them with respect, it increases positive behavior toward others, especially when students have more empathy (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010; Yeager, et al. 2013).

Bullying and Harassment

All students involved in bullying, even those who only witness it, can suffer long-term mental and physical health consequences. Although some research has shown declines in the efficacy of anti-bullying programs across adolescence (Yeager et al., 2015), there is evidence that suggests universal SEL programs



can reduce bullying in middle school (Espelage et al., 2013, 2015; Green et al., 2019). Recent research also shows that establishing prosocial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors around bullying and harassment in early adolescence can help prevent the likelihood of youth becoming victims or perpetrators of physical and sexual violence later in life (Espelage et al., 2018; Leemis et al., 2019).

Upstanders, those who help prevent and intervene in bullying situations, can reduce victimization by more than 50 percent (Hawkins et al., 2001). Whereas adolescents with lower levels of empathy are more likely to join in bullying, those with higher levels of empathy are more likely to help victims of bullying. The Second Step Middle School Program helps students learn to recognize bullying and harassment in the modern world and provides strategies for students to reduce these negative behaviors in a thoughtful, safe, and responsible way.

Conclusion

The Second Step Middle School Program helps students in early adolescence cope with challenges, create and maintain positive relationships, and succeed both socially and academically. The engaging lessons equip students with the mindsets, knowledge, and skills they need to handle strong emotions, make and follow through on good decisions, and create strong friendships while avoiding or de-escalating peer conflicts.

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