Second Step®

REVIEW OF RESEARCH
Child Protection Unit

Introduction

According to the most recent federal statistics, over half a million children are victims of child abuse and neglect each year (ACF, 2013). Experiencing child abuse and neglect is often associated with negative effects on children's social functioning (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Shields, Cicchetti, & Ryan, 1994), emotional functioning (Broman-Fulks et al., 2007; Kilpatrick et al., 2003; Kim-Spoon, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2013; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001), physical well-being (Alink, Cicchetti, Kim, & Rogosch, 2012), and academic achievement (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Rowe & Eckenrode, 1999; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). The Second Step Child Protection Unit, combined with Second Step Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), provides a comprehensive approach to help children feel safe and supported. The Second Step Child Protection Unit includes training and resources for administrators, program directors, and staff who work with children; classroom lessons and activities for children; and resources for families. This review will explain how the Child Protection Unit translates the research on child maltreatment (abuse and/or neglect) into these multiple program components, which build on the foundation of Second Step SEL to give schools and youth programs the tools they need to help children stay safe.

Prevalence of Maltreatment in the United States: Scope of the Problem

Although a child may experience multiple forms of maltreatment, national estimates from Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators show that more than 75% of children experienced neglect, more than 15% experienced physical abuse, and just under 10% experienced

sexual abuse (ACF, 2013). New research suggests that approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys report experiencing childhood sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014). However, accurate statistics on the prevalence of child and adolescent sexual abuse are difficult to obtain because abuse is vastly underreported and the definitions vary. More broadly, most mental health and child protection professionals in the United States agree that child sexual abuse is common and represents a serious national problem (Finkelhor, 2009).

The Social-Emotional Learning Foundation

Second Step SEL lays a foundation of prosocial norms that create safe and supportive classrooms for all children. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs involve "the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments" (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009). A meta-analysis by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) found that students participating in SEL programs showed significant gains in academic achievement and SEL skills, attitudes, and behaviors. The SEL skills taught in Second Step SEL provide an important foundation for the Child Protection Unit. In particular, assertiveness is a skill that is introduced in Second Step SEL and reinforced in the Child Protection Unit curriculum. For example, children are taught to stand up for themselves in an assertive, non-aggressive way and to ask for help in difficult, uncomfortable, or potentially dangerous situations. Assertiveness is taught through direct instruction and children are given many

opportunities to practice this skill. Research has shown that resistance skill scores are higher when children participate in active-learning programs that embed multiple opportunities for children to practice (Blumberg, Chadwick, Fogarty, Speth, & Chadwick, 1991; Wurtele, Marrs, & Miller-Perrin, 1987).

Child Protection Unit: Beyond Social-Emotional Learning

Research studies show that the ongoing stress that accompanies difficult experiences such as child abuse and neglect can be traumatic for children, affecting them socially, emotionally, and academically as children and having an impact on their health, psychological adjustment (Kim, Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Manly, 2009; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Young, Harford, Kinder, & Savell, 2007), substance use (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Kilpatrick et al., 2003), and success in adulthood (Heckman, 2008). Although child characteristics are not viewed as a primary contributing factor to child maltreatment, children who display difficult behaviors are at greater risk of escalating negative parent–child interactions (Patterson, 1997) that may include physical abuse (Ammerman, 1991; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Helping children to reduce challenging behaviors by supporting their social and emotional development may help engender the development of better parent-child relations. As such, teaching children social and emotional skills like problem solving, empathy, and emotion management could be considered as preventive (or protective) factors against child maltreatment.

Over the past several decades we have also learned that there are many ecological risks associated with child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993; Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997). That is, a complex mix of parent, family, child, community, and environmental characteristics can contribute to child abuse and neglect. Thus, prevention strategies that are designed to address the multiple influences that may lead to child abuse and neglect are most effective (Daro & Donnelly, 2002). Given this, the Second Step Child Protection Unit includes training and resources for administrators, program directors, and staff who work with children; lessons that teach self-protection skills directly to children; and media and other resources

for families focused on how to protect their children from child sexual abuse.

Staff-Focused Content

Leadership Training

Leadership is important to the success and sustainability of classroom-based prevention programs (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2005; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). Building administrators and program directors can send a clear message that child protection is a priority and motivate staff to implement skills learned in the Child Protection Unit training. Further, research by Yanowitz, Monte, and Tribble (2003) underscores the importance of emphasizing policies and procedures in child abuse training within the school setting. The Child Protection Unit curriculum is unique in that it includes a robust training for school administrators or program leaders that helps them assess their current child protection policies, procedures, and practices. This in turn helps them develop a comprehensive child protection strategy that aligns with current research and best practice. This includes policies and procedures designed to protect children from abuse in a school or youth program setting, such as establishing a staff code of conduct and procedures for screening and hiring staff and volunteers, as well as for reporting staff violations of protection policies.

Staff Training

The burden of responsibility for abuse prevention does not fall primarily on children. Teachers have more access to children than almost any other professional; so much so that their opportunity to help protect the health and safety of their students through interventions continues to be great (Crosson-Tower, 2003). Indeed, teachers and school administrators are often largely responsible for reporting abuse (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003). Despite this, barriers exist that may prevent them from being fully effective in this role. For instance, evidence indicates that staff are often ill prepared to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse (Kenny, 2004). In addition, under-reporting of child abuse by teachers is common (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004). Several researchers have conducted studies to understand the barriers that lead to this phenomenon. Their findings

revealed that under-reporting among teachers is often associated with a lack of knowledge about the signs and symptoms of abuse (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kenny, 2001), lack of knowledge of reporting procedures or unclear reporting procedures (Alvarez et al., 2004; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005), and fear of making inaccurate reports (Kenny, 2001). Likewise research has also indicated that teachers may benefit from increased training on reporting procedures (Alvarez et al., 2004) particularly because teachers have received little training on this topic (Kenny, 2001; 2004). In fact, one study found that the majority of teachers report minimal or inadequate pre-service training (74%) and minimal or inadequate professional training (57%) on child abuse reporting (Kenny, 2001).

Teacher and staff education is an important component for implementing effective child protection programs (Riley & Roach, 2006). Thus, the Child Protection Unit training specifically prepares staff to recognize common indicators of abuse and neglect and report according to their school or program's reporting procedures when they have "reasonable cause to suspect" a child is being abused and/or neglected. In addition, the Child Protection Unit trains staff to respond appropriately to students when they disclose maltreatment. It encourages the development of safe, supportive, and nurturing relationships between children and staff so a child may feel comfortable disclosing any abuse or neglect that may have occurred. It also provides staff with techniques to respond supportively to children who may be exhibiting symptomology of child maltreatment.

Child-Focused Content

The most commonly used method to prevent child sexual abuse is through teaching children lessons in school-based programs (Topping & Barron, 2009). Research suggests children are capable of learning many personal safety skills related to abuse prevention and sexual abuse prevention in particular (Finkelhor, 2007; 2009; Kenny et al., 2008; Zwi et al., 2008). For example, a comprehensive review of 27 studies indicated that prevention program participants had statistically significant gains in their knowledge of personal safety skills compared to the control group children (Davis & Gidycz, 2000).

The Child Protection Unit student lessons build on the foundation of social-emotional and assertiveness skills that are taught in the Second Step lessons by teaching children how to refuse unsafe and sexually abusive situations and touches. Specifically, the lessons encourage these behaviors by teaching learners skills in three areas: (a) recognizing unsafe and sexually abusive situations and touches, (b) immediately reporting these situations to adults, and (c) assertively refusing these situations whenever possible.

Recognizing

Children as young as five years of age have been able to distinguish between innocuous and dangerous situations (Boyle & Lutzker, 2005). In the Child Protection Unit lessons, children will learn to apply specific recognition skills in dangerous or abusive situations. In learning to recognize unsafe situations, children are taught rules about general safety (such as wearing a helmet when riding a bike, not playing with guns or fire). Rules about touching safety, which focus on preventing sexual abuse, are also introduced as important safety subjects. When elementary-aged children are taught to use rules (such as, "Never keep secrets about touching") as the primary decision-making tool, they demonstrate a greater capacity to recognize unsafe situations (Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, & Kondrick, 1989).

Reporting

Research indicates receiving personal safety lessons encourages children to disclose any past or ongoing abuse (Finkelhor, 2007; Finkelhor, 2009; Topping & Barron, 2009). The Child Protection Unit lessons give children a clear message to report any unsafe or abusive situation to an adult and reinforce the notion that, in general, grown-ups are there to take care of them and make them feel safe and protected.

Refusing

Several studies demonstrate that school-based prevention programs improve children's assertiveness and increase protective factors such as saying words that mean "no" or getting away (Herbert, Lavoie, Piche, & Poitras, 2001; Zwi et al., 2008). As described previously, the Child Protection Unit lessons build on the assertiveness lessons in Second Step SEL, which provide

the foundation needed to teach skills on refusing unsafe situations and unwanted or abusive touches. These lessons also reinforce the message that children have the power to use their assertiveness skills to stand up to and refuse any behavior from another person.

Children are more likely to learn self-protection strategies if they receive comprehensive skill instruction, including opportunities to practice these skills in class, multi-day presentations, and materials to take home in an effort to jump-start discussions with their parents or caregivers (Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995). Programs incorporating more active modes of teaching (modeling, rehearsal, and reinforcement) have resulted in greater gains in knowledge and skills than those employing a didactic approach (Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Wurtele, Marrs, & Miller-Perrin, 1987; Wurtele & Saslawsky, 1986). The Child Protection Unit lessons adhere to these research-based practices. They include an array of teaching modes and give students multiple opportunities to practice the skills they learn. Each lesson also comes with an activity that children can do with a parent or caregiver at home to further practice the skills they have learned.

Family-Focused Content

Overall, classroom-based curricula that focus on teaching personal safety skills to children has had promising results (Topping & Barron, 2009). However, because most sexual abuse occurs within families, providing a comprehensive child protection program that includes parents as partners in protecting children from sexual abuse is important. Forming partnerships with parents can be beneficial in many ways in supporting child protection and sexual abuse prevention (Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992). For example, parents can support and reinforce personal safety lessons that children are getting at school. They can also provide safer environments for their children by recognizing potential grooming patterns of offenders (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010). Finally, encouraging parents to communicate with their children about sexual abuse can help protect children from abuse or make it easier for children to disclose if abuse has occurred. Encouraging parents and caregivers to talk with their children about sexual abuse is a key component of child sexual abuse

prevention. Many parents want to educate their children about sexual abuse but are reluctant to do so because it is a difficult topic to discuss (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010). Thus, the Child Protection Unit includes media and resources for families that provide strategies on how to communicate with their children about sexual abuse.

Conclusion

The foundational social-emotional skills provided in Second Step SEL, combined with staff training and child lessons in the Child Protection Unit, empower schools and programs to create a safe and supportive learning environment in which children can thrive. The Child Protection Unit carries this one step further by providing family materials that can contribute to greater protection beyond the lessons.

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