

Summary of the *Second Step* Middle School Review of Research

Introduction: Combining School and Life Success

The *Second Step* middle school program is a universal program designed to promote skills and attitudes that increase students' social and school success and prevent violence, bullying, and substance abuse. As a program for all students, it provides a foundation for creating a safe, respectful learning environment.

Early Adolescent Development

Early adolescence is a pivotal time for youth development. Children in early adolescence have not fully developed their abilities to think about long-term consequences and to use logic and reason to solve problems and make decisions. The move from elementary school to larger schools with multiple teachers can reduce school connectedness. Increased desire for autonomy coincides with greater exposure to risky situations. And the influence of friends and peers is magnified. All of these factors magnify the importance of teaching skills and attitudes that support positive choices and behaviors.

Risk and Protective Factors Framework

The *Second Step* program is based on prevention science research that shows many of the problem behaviors that threaten youth safety and success are driven by common factors. The *Second Step* program weaves skills and concepts throughout the lessons to target risk and protective factors linked to violence and aggression, substance use, and low academic achievement or school dropout.

The Five Themes in the *Second Step* Program

Research on positive youth development, resilience, and prevention of problem behaviors has been translated into an effective program by developing five themes across the classroom lessons:

1. Empathy and communication
2. Bullying prevention
3. Emotion management and coping
4. Problem solving, goal setting, and decision making
5. Substance abuse prevention

1. Empathy and Communication

Having a higher level of empathy is linked to having more friends and higher academic achievement, less aggressive behavior and bullying, and being more helpful to peers. Empathy also provides a foundation for social and communication skills, which increase school connectedness by improving students' relationships with teachers and serve as protective factors against a range of problem behaviors. Research shows empathy skills can be successfully taught to adolescents using a social skills curriculum.

2. Bullying Prevention

The bullying-prevention unit uses these effective strategies to change students' bullying-related attitudes, norms, and behaviors:

- Increasing students' ability to identify bullying
- Increasing empathy for bullied students
- Increasing awareness of the importance and responsibility of bystanders
- Increasing positive bystander skills and behaviors

Throughout the units, the program also helps to reduce bullying by improving social skills, increasing friendships and positive peer relations, and increasing assertiveness skills.

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 can be taught, and the skills addressed in the program include self-calming techniques, such as deep breathing and positive self-talk.

4. Problem Solving (Grade 6), Decision Making (Grade 7), and Goal Setting (Grade 8)

The *Second Step* Action Steps are taught across all grade levels of the program. Teaching students interpersonal problem-solving skills can reduce and prevent problem behaviors. Because peer pressure peaks in early adolescence, 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.

5. Substance Abuse Prevention

The *Second Step* substance abuse lessons focus on changing norms and attitudes through providing accurate information and building on the 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. Substance abuse prevention is also addressed throughout the program by teaching skills and concepts that address important risk and protective factors.

Instructional Practices to Support Program Goals

The *Second Step* middle school materials include activities and tips for effective instructional practices across the program's themes.

Children learn new skills best through teaching, observation, rehearsal, and feedback in the context of social interaction. Strategies to support new learning include:

- Using interactive techniques
- Teaching and supporting effective group-work practices
- Modeling the social-emotional and communication skills taught in the program
- Cueing, coaching, and providing feedback on students' use of program skills

Go online to www.secondstep.org for the complete Review of Research and full reference list.