

What Does *Getting Results* Say About Effective Prevention Strategies for Elementary School Youths?

The basic principles of effective prevention strategies remain constant across all grade levels.¹ The particular challenge for elementary educators is on helping children to build internal assets and strengthen their connection to family and school, which may protect them from developing problem behaviors in adolescence (*Getting Results*, Update 1, pp. 13–27). The best prevention strategies for elementary schools focus on (1) *creating a caring school environment with an emphasis on academic skills* and (2) *strengthening children's positive (prosocial) bonds with peers and adults*.

Creating a Caring School Environment

Schools can be characterized as “caring” when teachers, other adults, and students care about each other. Connectedness to school is fostered by providing students with the opportunity for participation, influence, and decision making in the establishment of norms, goals, and values (*Getting Results*, Update 1, pp. 46–47). In a caring school environment, practices that build students' assets and support all students permeate the entire school community. Students who attend schools that are caring communities demonstrate stronger academic skills, display better interpersonal behaviors, and engage in fewer high-risk activities.

The Child Development Project/Caring School Community (CDP/CSC) is a program for kindergarten through grade six that establishes a variety of classroom, schoolwide, and home-to-school approaches, such as class meetings, a “buddy” program pairing older and younger students, and family involvement activities that influence the overall atmosphere of the classroom and school. The emphasis is on positive interpersonal values and attitudes, student autonomy, self-direction, and participation in classroom decision making. One evaluation of the CDP/CSC found that the program had significant effects on students' liking for school, enjoyment of class, academic motivation, and sense of community (*Getting Results*, Update 5, pp. 55–56). The CDP/CSC also showed many positive effects on prosocial attitudes and behaviors (e.g., concern for others, prosocial conflict resolution skills, democratic values, and altruistic behavior) as discussed in the section below.

Programs that reduce violent behavior also contribute to a caring school environment by helping students to feel safe. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (*Getting Results*, Part I, pp. 119–121) reduces the opportunities and rewards for bullying. Results from that program show reductions in bullying, improvements in classroom order and discipline, and more positive student attitudes toward schoolwork. Another program, Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS), improves the classroom and school atmosphere by helping students to develop self-control and interpersonal problem solving, which reduces aggressive and disruptive classroom behavior (*Getting Results*, Update 4, pp. 54–57).

Note: The *Getting Results* documents may be downloaded at <http://www.gettingresults.org>.

¹ Effective prevention strategies require that schools use science-based programs that have been demonstrated to be effective; provide a caring environment in which students are expected to meet high expectations; and reinforce the prevention message about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence at school, at home, and in the community.

Programs That Create a Caring School Environment

| Program Title | Program Focus and Grade Level | Outcomes and Effectiveness | Getting Results Reference |
|--|---|--|---------------------------|
| Child Development Project/Caring School Community | Alcohol, other drugs, violence prevention, and youth development (kindergarten through grade six) | Significant effects on students' liking for school, enjoyment of class, academic motivation, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and sense of community | Update 5, pp. 55–56 |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention Program | Violence prevention (kindergarten through grade eight) | Reductions in the reported incidence of bully and victim experiences, reductions in other antisocial behavior at school (vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy), and improved school climate | Part I, pp. 119–121 |
| Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) | Violence prevention (kindergarten through grade six) | Lower levels of aggression and disruptive behavior among students in intervention classrooms; more positive atmosphere in intervention classrooms | Update 4, pp. 54–57 |

Strengthening Children's Positive Social Bonds

In the primary grades, children are oriented first to themselves, then to parents and other adults. In the upper elementary years, children are most influenced by parents and teachers and then by peers (*Getting Results*, Part I, p. 7). Thus, elementary school is the ideal time to promote bonding to school and family (*Getting Results*, Part I, p. 48), which research has shown contributes to the number of protective assets that children develop.

Two programs are particularly effective in strengthening children's prosocial bonds: SOAR and Second Step. In SOAR (Skills, Opportunities, and Recognition, formerly called the Seattle Social Development Project; *Getting Results*, Part I, p. 101; Update 3, pp. 37–38), teachers learn proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning; students learn social competence skills; and parents learn how to promote their children's academic achievement and reduce their risk of drug use. Students were followed through age eighteen. Those who participated in the entire program reported less involvement in violence, sexual intercourse, and heavy drinking, and had a greater commitment to school and better academic achievement.

Second Step is a classroom-based social skills program that is designed to increase children's social–emotional competence and other protective factors and reduce impulsive, high-risk, and aggressive behaviors. Group discussion, modeling, coaching, and practice are used to increase students' social competence, risk assessment, decision-making ability, self-regulation, and positive goal setting. Results showed an increase in students' positive social behavior and in the likelihood of their choosing positive social goals. In addition, results showed a reduction in physical aggression and the need for adult intervention during conflicts (*Getting Results*, Update 4, pp. 32 and 95).

Programs That Strengthen Children's Prosocial Bonds

| Program Title | Program Focus and Grade Level | Outcomes and Effectiveness | Getting Results Reference |
|---|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| Second Step | Social skills development, violence reduction (prekindergarten through grade eight) | Increase in positive social behavior and positive goal setting; decrease in physical aggression and need for adult intervention | Update 4, pp. 32 and 95 |
| SOAR (Skills, Opportunities, and Recognition)/Seattle Social Development Project | Alcohol and violence prevention, and youth development (kindergarten through grade six) | Greater commitment to school; better academic achievement; less involvement in violence, sex, and alcohol use among program participants at age eighteen follow-up | Update 3, pp. 37–38 Part I, p. 101 |

Conclusion

Elementary schools have a vital role to play in helping children to avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems, as well as violence, and to grow up to become healthy, productive citizens. The challenge for elementary school educators is not on choosing the right prevention curriculum, but on building students' internal assets that will help protect them from engaging in high-risk behaviors. This is best achieved by focusing on the creation of caring school communities that support all students — from the primary grades onward — to master both academic and social skills.