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WHAT WORKS FOR PROMOTING AND ENHANCING POSITIVE SOCIAL SKILLS: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions

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OVERVIEW

Positive social skills are recognized as critical for healthy social development. Children with positive social skills are more likely to have high self-esteem, have positive relationships with peers,¹ and achieve in school.² Moreover, research finds that positive social skills are associated with positive later life outcomes, such as successful marriages and careers.³ On the other hand, deficits in social skills are related to aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, fighting and delinquency.⁴ Identification of intervention strategies and practices that promote social skills can help increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and adolescents, and reduce the occurrence of negative outcomes.

This *Fact Sheet* reviews 38 rigorously evaluated programs to identify what works to promote positive social skills among children and adolescents (such as getting along with others, expressing empathy to others, trying to resolve conflicts, and regulating emotions and behaviors). This literature review identifies practices that work, or do not work, to promote positive social skills. Most of these interventions include multiple components (for example, parent training, workshops and classroom-based curricula). For these interventions, it is not possible to determine the *specific practices* that are responsible for producing the impacts.

Overall, most (27 out of 38) of the program interventions that targeted positive social skills or measured impacts on social skills worked, that is, they significantly increased at least one social skill in children or adolescents. Of the interventions that worked, 11 have manuals.ⁱ Among the remaining 11 interventions, eight had mixed reviews, and three had no statistically significant impacts.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty-eight random assignment experimental evaluations that address positive social skills for children and youth are examined. All of the identified programs were drawn from Child Trends' online database of experimentally-evaluated, out-of-school time interventions, called LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully).ⁱⁱ Findings for the programs in this *Fact Sheet* are reported in the following categories:

Not Proven to Work. Programs in this category have *statistically non-significant* or *marginally significant* impacts on social skills.

ⁱ [Big Brothers/Big Sisters Strengthening Families Program](#), [Project SAFE \(Strengthening America's Families and Environment\)](#), [Peace Builders](#), [RELATE Program for Teens](#), [Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program](#), [Second Step](#), [Fast Track Prevention](#), [Leadership Education Through Athletic Development \(LEAD\)](#), [Reconnecting Youth](#), [EQUIP Primary Project](#)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.childtrends.org/links>

Mixed Findings Programs in this category have *varied impacts* either on different outcomes or at different times. For example, a program that results in significant improvements in conflict resolution at post-test, but has no impact at a one-year follow-up would be rated as having mixed findings. Similarly, a program that works for boys, but not for girls, would also receive a “mixed findings” rating.

Found to Work. Programs in this category have *positive and statistically significant*ⁱⁱⁱ impacts on at least one targeted social skills outcome.

WHAT WORKS

This synthesis identifies strategies that are associated with program interventions that have been found to promote social skills. These strategies may be used to design a new intervention or improve an existing intervention, either in an out-of-school time program intervention or in a school setting. We have organized our discussion of strategies and practices around five categories: setting, population, delivery method, staff selection, and content. We describe each element below.

Setting

- **Implement community-based programs with vulnerable populations.** All six community-based programs designed to promote positive social skills among children at-risk for negative outcomes (such as substance use, violence, and delinquency), had a positive impact on at least one social skills outcome.^{iv}
- **Implement school-based programs.** Interventions delivered in school-based settings were found to have positive impacts on social skills promotion and reinforcement a little more than half the time. Of the 32 total programs implemented in the school environment, 18 worked.

Population

- **Involve parents for children in middle childhood.** Evidence suggests that parental participation often works when promoting and reinforcing social skills for elementary-age children. Three of five programs that specifically targeted children in middle childhood (6-11 years) and included parents in the intervention, had impacts on the promotion or reinforcement of social skills.^v
- **Involve peers for children in middle childhood and adolescents.** Peer-related activities, including pairing and peer teaching, seems to work during middle childhood and adolescence. Five of seven programs that incorporated activities in which peers either led activities or were partnered with another peer had positive impacts on social skills.^{vi}

ⁱⁱⁱ Reported impacts are those reported by the evaluators to be significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ level. Note that this literature review does not focus on the magnitude or duration of the impact, though this information is generally included in the LINKS program summaries.

^{iv} [Bicultural Competence Skills Program](#) [Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#) [Cognitive/Affective Empathy Training Program](#) [EQUIP](#), [New Hope Project](#) [Untitled Program for Siblings of Children with Disabilities](#)

^v [Fast Track Prevention](#), [Incredible Years Series](#) [Montreal Prevention Experiment](#)

^{vi} [EQUIP](#), [Fast Track Prevention](#), [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#) [Montreal Prevention Experiment](#) [Peace Builders](#)

Delivery Method

- **Employ multiple instruction strategies.** Intervention strategies that combine some level of teaching, modeling, and coaching to promote positive social skills usually work, but not always. Eleven^{vii} of 15 programs that use multiple intervention strategies had impacts on social skills promotion or maintenance.
- **Integrate instructional technologies.** Initial evidence suggests that technology-infused programs can work. Two^{viii} of three programs that used videotapes or DVDs as curriculum guides worked.

Staff Selection

- **Use teachers as intervention facilitators.** All eight programs that were teacher-delivered had a significant impact on at least one social skills outcome.^{ix}
- **Inclusion of paraprofessionals and/or researchers.** Interventions delivered by paraprofessionals and/or researchers, for the most part, have at least one positive impact. Of the 29 programs that were administered by a paraprofessional or a researcher, 19 worked.^x

Content

- **Teach problem-solving skills.** The most consistent and frequent impacts were found for programs that taught problem-solving skills. All six programs that focused on improving how children solve problems had impacts at one-year follow-ups.^{xi}
- **Target multiple skill sets.** Programs that target multiple skills (for example, self-regulation skills, problem solving skills, and conflict resolution skills) have been found to work. Seven^{xii} of eight programs and interventions that focus on building and strengthening multiple skill sets had positive impacts on at least one of these outcomes.

vii [EQUIP](#), [Incredible Years Series](#), [The Interpersonal Skills Program](#), [Leadership Education Through Athletic Development \(LEAD\)](#), [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#), [Montreal Prevention Experiment](#), [Peace Builders](#), [Problem-Solving Skills Training Program](#), [Social Problem-Solving \(SPS\)](#), [Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys](#), [Structured Learning Training \(SLT\)](#)

viii [Incredible Years Series](#), [Social Problem-Solving \(SPS\)](#)

ix [Anger Coping Program](#), [Fast Track Prevention](#), [Reconnecting Youth](#), [RELATE Program for Teens](#), [Strengthening Families Program](#), [Structured Learning Training \(SLT\)](#), [The Interpersonal Skills Program](#), [Second Step](#)

x [Bicultural Competence Skills Program](#), [Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#), [Children Are People Too \(CAP\)](#), [Communication Skills Training program \(CST\)](#), [Incredible Years Series](#), [Leadership Education Through Athletic Development \(LEAD\)](#), [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#), [Montreal Prevention Experiment](#), [New Hope Project](#), [Peace Builders](#), [Positive Youth Development Program](#), [Problem-Solving Skills Training Program](#), [Project SAFE \(Strengthening America's Families and Environment\)](#), [Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys](#), [Social Skills Training Program for Children's Social Functioning](#), [Steps to Respect](#), [Bullying Prevention Program](#)

xi [Anger Coping Program](#), [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#), [Project SAFE \(Strengthening America's Families and Environment\)](#), [Problem Solving Skills Training](#), [Social Problem-Solving \(SPS\)](#), [Strengthening Families Program](#)

xii [Social Relations Interventions](#), [Bicultural Competence Skills Program](#), [New Hope Project](#), [Project SAFE \(Strengthening America's Families and Environment\)](#), [Incredible Years Series](#), [The Aban Aya Project](#), [Safe Dates](#), [Bicultural Competence Skills Program](#), [Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#)

- **Based on three evaluation studies, programs that offer incentives appear to have positive impacts when targeting aggressive behaviors in children.** Two^{xiii} of three programs that used incentives and targeted aggressive behavior were found to have positive impacts.

MIXED REVIEWS

- **The duration of programs did not appear to influence whether impacts on social skills outcomes were found.** For example, of the three programs that did not work, the duration of the intervention ranged from two weeks to two years.^{xiv} Similarly, the 27 programs found to have positive impacts on at least one social skills outcome ranged in duration from three weeks to ten years.
- **No substantial differences were found depending upon the instructional technique employed. Behavioral training, lecturing, and participant-centered strategies (such as role playing, group discussion, and games) all worked, to some degree, for social skills.** Three^{xv} of 6 cognitive behavioral training interventions, seven^{xvi} of 9 lecture-based program, and 17^{xvii} of 23 programs that incorporated participant-centered components, all had significant impacts on social skills.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK

It is difficult to draw conclusions about what types of programs, and/or strategies and practices do not work given that the three programs that had no significant impacts on any social skills outcome varied on targeted population, duration, approach, and format. For example, of the three interventions that did not work, two targeted children in middle childhood, while the other targeted adolescents. Similarly, one of the interventions implemented cognitive behavioral training, while the other two employed role modeling and group discussion strategies. More research is needed to better understand what components lead to unsuccessful results.

NEEDED RESEARCH

While the majority of intervention programs targeting social skills discussed above were found to be effective, additional research is needed to understand all of the elements critical to creating a “model” social skills program. Below, we outline some areas that warrant further examination.

^{xiii} [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#), [Peace Builders](#)

^{xiv} [Minnesota Competence Enhancement Project \(MCEP\) Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways](#), [Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys](#)

^{xv} [Anger Coping Program](#), [EQUIP](#), [Cognitive/Affective Empathy Training Program](#), [Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program](#)

^{xvi} [Children Are People Too \(CAP\)](#), [Communication Skills Training program \(CST\)](#), [Fast Track Prevention](#), [Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers \(LIFT\)](#), [Positive Youth Development Program](#), [Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys](#), [Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program](#), [Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program](#)

^{xvii} [Bicultural Competence Skills Program](#), [Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#), [Communication Skills Training program \(CST\)](#), [Incredible Years Series](#), [Leadership Education Through Athletic Development \(LEAD\)](#), [Montreal Prevention Experiment](#), [Peace Builders](#), [Reconnecting Youth](#), [RELATE Program for Teens](#), [Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys](#), [Social Problem-Solving \(SPS\)](#), [Strengthening Families Program](#), [Structured Learning Training \(SLT\)](#), [The Interpersonal Skills Program](#), [Cognitive/Affective Empathy Training Program](#), [Primary Project](#), [Untitled Program for Siblings of Children with Disabilities](#)

- **Identification of techniques that work for reducing internalizing behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, shyness, passivity).** In general, most of the programs in our review focused on children who engage in externalizing or acting out behavior, and not children who engage in internalizing behavior. In fact, two of the programs that did not work targeted children who were socially isolated from others.
- **Examination of the frequency and intensity of positive social skills interventions.** The programs and interventions reviewed varied in frequency and intensity, but this element was rarely examined during evaluation.
- **Assessment of outcome differences among subgroups (e.g., age, race, socioeconomic status).** A better understanding of *how* interventions targeting social skills affect different groups is critical to their ability to have generalizable success.
- **Exploration of the effectiveness of mentoring on the development of social skills.** Both interventions that implemented mentoring worked, but more evidence is needed to determine whether and when mentoring promotes and/or enhances social skills.
- **Investigation of long-term impacts.** Most of the interventions reviewed only conducted short-term follow-ups. More evidence is needed on the long term impacts of interventions that promote social skill development.

DISCUSSION

The results from this *Fact Sheet* suggest, in general, that intervention programs that target social skills have positive impacts. More importantly, our findings suggest that a variety of strategies and practices can be used to promote social skills. Although few strategies or practices stood out as *always* effective, interventions effectively promoting and enhancing skills tended to be participant-centered, multi-faceted, and implemented by teachers. For example, interventions that incorporated peer-teaching, group discussion, or role modeling, as well as teacher-led instruction were effective. Similarly, programs that combined coaching and/or modeling along with lectures also had positive impacts. The success of such strategies provides support for including these components into an intervention targeting social skills.

Nonetheless, expansion, replication and further research on intervention programs to promote social skills among children and adolescents are needed. This seems especially important given the high levels of bullying and physical aggression, and other problem behavior in schools and communities across the country.⁵ More research will aid policymakers, educators and practitioners in their efforts to foster healthy social development among all children and youth.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mize J. (2005). Social skills intervention and peer relationship difficulties in early childhood: In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/MizeANGxp.pdf>
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- ³ Bay-Hinitz, A. K., Peterson, R. F., Quilitch, H. R. (1994). Cooperative games: A way to modify aggressive and cooperative behaviors in young children. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, *27*(3), 435-446.
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- ⁵ Maag, J.W . (2006). Social skills training for students with emotional and behavioral disorders: A review of reviews. *Behavioral Disorders*, *32*, 1, 5-17.

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Experimental Evaluations of Programs that Examined Impacts on One or More Social Skills Outcomes and Whether They Were Not Proven to Work, Had Mixed Findings or Found to Work
 (Source: <http://www.childtrends.org/links>)

OUTCOME AREA	NOT PROVEN TO WORK	MIXED REVIEWS	PROVEN TO WORK
<p>Conflict-resolution skills (e.g., dealing with teasing, losing, accusations, being left out, peer pressure)</p>	<p>Project Ploughshares Puppets for Peace (P4), a school-based intervention which targets bullying behavior. The program had no significant impacts on knowledge about bullying</p> <p>Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways, a school-based program strives to reduce violent situations and behavior by promoting peaceful alternatives among sixth-graders in Richmond public middle schools. The program did not have a significant impact on application of nonviolent responses.</p>	<p>The Aban Aya Project is an intervention program designed to reduce rates of risky behaviors among African American children in 5th through 8th grade. The program significantly reduced the rate of violence and provoking behavior. There were no significant program impacts found for girls.</p> <p>Early Risers, a summer program that promotes positive socio-emotional development by targeting younger children who exhibit aggressive behaviors led to significant improvements in social skills, but the improvement did not persist over time.</p> <p>Second Step, a violence prevention program for elementary school students, led to significant increased instances of prosocial behavior, but the increase did not persist over time.</p>	<p>Bicultural Competence Skills Program, a 10-session program designed to promote "fluency" in the two distinct cultures in which bicultural adolescents exist resulted in significant long-term impacts on peer pressure resistance skills.</p> <p>Big Brothers/Big Sisters, a well-established, intensive mentoring program, designed to promote emotional support, positive social skills, feelings of safety and security, academic skills, and more positive relationships with family and peers. The intervention led to significant decreases in the likelihood of hitting someone.</p> <p>Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT), a school-based program designed to decrease delinquent behaviors and promote positive development led to significantly greater improvements in problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.</p> <p>Peace Builders, a school-wide violence prevention program designed aimed to change school climate by promoting prosocial behavior and conflict resolution among students and school staff. The program showed significant improvement in child social competence and peace-building behavior.</p> <p>RELATE Program for Teens, a computer-based program designed to improve behavioral skills. The program led to significant increases in prosocial behaviors.</p> <p>Steps to Respect Bullying Prevention Program, a bullying prevention program for elementary school students, led to significant increases in instances of agreeable behavior in the opinion of an outside observer.</p>

<p>Interpersonal skills (e.g., sharing, asking for permission, joining an activity, waiting your turn)</p>	<p><u>Social Skills Training Program for Children's Social Functioning</u>, a program for children aged 10-13 with social problems. It seeks to give these children the skills to improve everyday social interactions and decrease problem behavior with peers. No significant impacts on problem behaviors were found.</p>	<p><u>Cognitive/Affective Empathy Training Program</u>, a program for aggressive adolescent females led to significant increases in affective empathy, but not in cognitive empathy.</p> <p><u>Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)</u>, a program for young children with autism seeks to improve communication skills. The program significantly increased children's initiation to communicate, but no impacts were found on communication or reciprocal social interaction.</p>	<p><u>Anger Coping Program</u>, a program designed to provide aggressive or rejected Black children with positive social skills training to promote prosocial behaviors and cognitive-behavioral elements. The intervention was shown to have significant impacts.</p> <p><u>Children Are People Too (CAP)</u>, a school-based psychosocial and educational group program designed to address the problems of children who are exposed to familial substance abuse. The program had significant effects on decreasing social isolation and decreasing inappropriate classroom behavior and other social difficulties.</p> <p><u>Incredible Years Series</u>, a prevention and intervention program intended to enhance children's social and emotional competencies and ultimately reduce behavior problems, significantly enhanced children's academic and social competence, and decreased aggression.</p> <p><u>The Interpersonal Skills Program</u>, a program developed to teach interpersonal problem-solving skills to preschool aged children resulted in significantly decreased social isolation, improved peer relations, and reduced interpersonal aggression and disruptive conduct.</p> <p><u>New Hope Project</u>, a welfare demonstration project, led to significantly improved prosocial skills.</p>
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<p>Relationship-building skills (e.g., interacting with others, initiating conversations)</p>		<p>Early Risers, a summer program for aggressive elementary school children with a parent training component, led to the significant derivation of greater companionship and recreation from friendships. However, impacts did not persist over time.</p> <p>Peer Coping Skills Training (PCS), a program designed for aggressive children in first through third grade led to significantly lower aggression levels, but not enough to move children out of clinical range.</p> <p>Primary Project, a school-based, mental health prevention program for children at-risk for school adjustment problems. Significant improvements were made on indicators of school adjustment. No impacts were found for externalizing behaviors or frustration tolerance levels.</p> <p>Safe Dates, an intervention designed to prevent adolescent dating violence led to significantly greater reports of constructive communication during disagreements and significantly less favorable attitudes toward dating violence. Participants, however, were not less likely to report being victims of abuse in their current relationships.</p> <p>Social Skills Training Program for Pre-Adolescent Girls with Few Friends, a program designed to use social skills training and interpersonal problem solving methods to improve the social skills of 5th and 6th grade girls who were selected by their teachers as having few friends. Observation data indicated significant impacts on time spent alone, and engagement in conversation. No impacts were found on teacher ratings.</p> <p>Untitled Program for Siblings of Children with Disabilities, a program designed to provide children who have a sibling with a disability with a rewarding and supportive environment had no impact on quality of sibling relationships or family functioning, but significantly improved socio-emotional functioning, self esteem, social support giving, and anxiety and stress levels.</p>	<p>Big Brothers/Big Sisters, a well-established, intensive mentoring program, designed to promote emotional support, positive social skills, feelings of safety and security, academic skills, and more positive relationships with family and peers. The intervention led to significant increases in peer and family relationships.</p> <p>Communication Skills Training program (CST), a program is designed to promote self-disclosure and empathy in adolescents' interactions with others, led to a significant increase in levels of self-disclosure and empathetic response.</p> <p>Montreal Prevention Experiment, an intervention for parents and children designed to reduce antisocial behaviors among boys, resulted in significantly better scores on measures of school adjustment and delinquency.</p> <p>New Hope Project, a welfare demonstration project, led to significantly improved peer relationships.</p> <p>Social Skills and Academic Skills Training for Rejected Boys, a program designed to increase positive social interactions of socially isolated or rejected children in 4th grade, led to significant increases in social preference ratings by peers.</p> <p>Strengthening Families Program, an intervention that aims to teach life skills to 10- to 14-year olds and improve parent-child relationships resulted in a significant reduction in aggressive and destructive behavior, and hostile behavior towards parents.</p> <p>Structured Learning Training (SLT), a program designed to increase assertiveness among high school students who are unassertive or aggressive led to significant increases in assertive interactions with teachers, peers, and parents.</p>
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<p>Problem-solving skills (e.g., asking for help, apologizing, accepting consequences, deciding what to do)</p>			<p>Anger Coping Program, a program designed to provide aggressive or rejected Black children with positive social skills training to promote prosocial behaviors and cognitive-behavioral elements. The intervention was shown to have significant impacts.</p> <p>Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT), a school-based program designed to decrease delinquent behaviors and promote positive development led to significantly greater improvements in problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.</p> <p>Project SAFE (Strengthening America's Families and Environment), a program for 1st graders that addresses problem-solving skills. The program was effective in significantly improving student-school bonding, social competence, and family relationships.</p> <p>Problem Solving Skills Training, a program developed for children lacking in the everyday social skills needed to solve interpersonal problems. The 24-unit program focuses on problem-solving techniques but also includes components to address self-esteem, assertiveness, communication, stress management, and social values. The program was effective in significantly helping children consider the consequences of social actions</p> <p>Social Problem-Solving (SPS), a program designed to give children in elementary school with deficits in social problem-solving the skills necessary to succeed in daily social interactions. The program led to significant increases in problem-solving skills (such as alternative solution generation and consequential thinking).</p> <p>Strengthening Families Program, an intervention that aims to teach life skills to 10- to 14-year olds and improve parent-child relationships resulted in a significant reduction in aggressive and destructive behavior, and hostile behavior towards parents.</p>
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<p>Self-regulation skills (e.g. discipline, impulse control, self-control, and managing emotions and behavior)</p>	<p><u>Minnesota Competence Enhancement Project (MCEP)</u>, a two-year school-based program which was designed to target children with behavior problems. The program had no significant impact on negative behaviors.</p>	<p><u>Early Risers</u>, a summer program for aggressive elementary school children with a parent training component, led to the significant derivation of greater companionship and recreation from friendships. However, impacts did not persist over time.</p> <p><u>EQUIP</u>, a multi-component program aimed at teaching social skills, anger management, and moral reasoning to children with conduct disorders. The program resulted in significant decreases in self-and staff-reported institutional misconduct. There were no significant changes in moral judgment.</p>	<p><u>Bicultural Competence Skills Program</u>, a 10-session program designed to promote "fluency" in the two distinct cultures in which bicultural adolescents exist. The program resulted in significantly higher levels of self-control.</p> <p><u>Fast Track Prevention</u>, a program designed to prevent antisocial behaviors through the promotion of child competencies and improved school context, parent-school relationships, and parenting skills.</p> <p><u>Leadership Education Through Athletic Development (LEAD)</u>, a school-based martial arts training program intended to increase students' self-regulation skills, resulted in significantly greater cognitive, affective, and physical self-regulation.</p> <p><u>Positive Youth Development Program</u>, a social competence promotion and substance use prevention program for middle school students resulted in significantly better coping and stress management skills.</p> <p><u>Project SAFE (Strengthening America's Families and Environment)</u> is a multi-component prevention program which seeks to prevent risk-enhancing behaviors, which can lead to substance abuse. The intervention was effective in significantly improving self-regulation.</p> <p><u>Reconnecting Youth</u>, a school-based program designed to increase school performance, decrease drug involvement, and improve mood management among high-risk high school students. The program led to significant decreases in anger and aggressive tendencies.</p> <p><u>Strengthening Families Program</u>, an intervention that aims to teach life skills to 10- to 14-year olds and improve parent-child relationships resulted in a significant reduction in aggressive and destructive behavior, and hostile behavior towards parents.</p>
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