

Promoting Emotional Resilience in Middle School Students: Evaluation of the PERCY School Program

Authors: John Peabody, MD, UCSF; Eun Rhee, UCSF; Steve Leventhal, CorStone

Purpose: National data indicate that the transitional adolescent years mark the onset and/or significant decline of academic performance, involvement in crime, and mental health problems. Over the past thirty years this youth crisis has given rise to a proliferation of adolescent-based programs structured on the principles of positive youth development, but only a few programs have been empirically studied. We evaluated a low cost, high impact integrative youth intervention for at-risk population to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Framework: We used a mixed method intervention program, consisting of 4 elements: Positive psychology, Emotional competence, Restorative practices and Communication for Youth (PERCY), also known as the CorStone 'Children's Resiliency Program'. The intervention combined current best practices in positive youth development and is based on a framework of developing youth resilience. The intervention consists of 50 minutes lessons in small groups, once a week for 26 weeks, led by two facilitators.

Methods: Data were collected from 173 6th grade students between September 2009 and May 2010. Outcomes were assessed at 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 8 months using instruments that measure our multi-method intervention (Youth Life Orientation Test and Nowicki Strickland Locus of Control for Children). Students also reported on conflicts and disruptive behavior. Thirteen teachers reported on students' positive and negative behavior and number of detentions and physical fights in their classrooms at the end of the fall and spring terms. Six co-facilitators were asked about progress they experienced during the school year.

Results: We found an early and significant increase in level of optimism and decrease in pessimism and external locus of control. These improvements occurred within the first three months. These changes in level of optimism and locus of control were maintained at the 8 months evaluation (Table 1). The level of pessimism, however, showed a slight increase at 8 months. Students' report of conflict and disruptive behavior indicate an increase in detention from 6 weeks to 3 months assessments and then no further increases, whereas no changes are reported in physical fights with classmates and non-classmates across the 4 assessments.

Teachers' reports indicate trends toward an increase in positive behavior and a decrease in the number of detentions for disciplinary problems as well as an increase in negative behavior and physical fights. Co-facilitators feedback indicate positive changes in (1) group characteristics, such as increases in group cohesion, formation of friendships, building of trust, and sharing of feelings; and (2) individual characteristics, such as growth of character strength, emotional intelligence and resilience, and increases in problem-solving, anger management, and conflict resolution skills.

Significance: The pilot study among at-risk population showed that a multi-method intervention delivered in the classroom setting improved several outcomes. The students showed an increase in emotional resilience and moderation of disruptive behavior. Teacher and co-facilitator reports

also indicate an increase in positive behavior and emotional resilience and coping skills. Thus, the pilot study shows promise for the PERCY school program in providing students with knowledge and skills that enhance their resilience and strengthen their ability to deal with conflict.

Table 1

Measures	Assessment Time Points			
	6 Weeks	3 Months	6 Months	8 Months
Level of Optimism ¹	13.05 _a	13.96 _b	13.67 _b	13.74 _b
Level of Pessimism ¹	4.95 _c	4.31 _{ab}	3.93 _a	4.58 _{bc}
External Locus of Control ²	7.89 _b	6.92 _a	6.68 _a	7.01 _a
Detention ³	.15 _a	.23 _{ab}	.24 _{ab}	.30 _b
Fight with Classmate ³	.11 _a	.15 _a	.13 _a	.15 _a
Fight with Non-classmate ³	.09 _a	.14 _a	.16 _a	.12 _a

Note: Scores in the rows not sharing a subscript (a, b, c) differ at $p < .05$ significance level.

¹Scores for Level of Optimism and Level of Pessimism range from 0 to 18 (Youth Life Orientation Test).

²External locus of control scores range from 0 to 20 (Nowicki Strickland Locus of Control for Children).

³Proportion of students who responded “yes” (vs. “no”) to “in the past year, given detention in school for disciplinary problems or had a physical fight with a classmate/another student in the school who is not a classmate”.

For More Information:

Steve Leventhal, Executive Director, CorStone

415.331.6161 x114

stevel@corstone.org