Effects of School Based Interventions to Improve Student Behavior
A Review of Six Campbell Systematic Reviews

What is this review of reviews about?

Children spend the majority of their young lives at school where they learn academic subjects and also social emotional behavior.

The school environment should be safe so that students are supported in their learning, and able to follow a normal development pathway.

Without the proper environment and support for learning, disruptive behavior can occur. This can result in reduced academic engaged time, lower grades, and lower performance on standardized tests.

Effective preventative programs to combat harmful student behaviors address this issue.

In order to preserve school as a productive and safe space for students, over three-quarters of schools in the United States use behavior intervention strategies to prevent bad behaviors such as bullying,

sexual violence, truancy, school refusal, and aggressive behavior in the classroom.

This review summarizes findings from six Campbell Collaboration systematic reviews on the efficacy of school based interventions for K-12 students who demonstrate at-risk behavior – that is, students perceived to have a risk factor that could result in violent, aggressive, or harmful behavior.

Interventions discussed in the reviews include cognitive behavioral therapy, one-on-one counseling with at-risk students, and school-wide campaigns targeting destructive mindsets.

Specifically, the six reviews analyze programs for students who are not regularly attending school, and interventions aimed at curbing violence and aggressive behaviors for students who do attend school.

First of all, two reviews focused on interventions aimed at truancy and chronic

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absences and psychosocial interventions addressing school refusal.

The remaining four reviews considered the evidence on social information processing interventions to reduce aggressive behaviors; classroom management techniques to mitigate aggressive behavior; bullying prevention programs; and school-based programs to reduce dating violence amongst teens.

Although the implementation of such interventions is widespread, there is no consensus on the modality, frequency or quality of intervention programming that is most effective for these students.

What have we learned from the Campbell reviews of school-based interventions?

Overall, school intervention programs are marginally effective at ensuring that more students attend school and at curtailing harmful student behaviors. Students participating in 28 programs addressing chronic truancy improved their attendance by nearly five days per year, although most studies found students still attended fewer than 90 percent of their school days even after the programs. Nearly 500 students participated in eight programs, seven of which were CBT programs focused on alleviating school refusal due to anxiety. Participating students experienced no

decrease in reported anxiety but did show significant increases in school attendance.

Most schools in the U.S. employ some form of violence prevention program and many use social information processing interventions to help students deal with the underlying thought processes that lead to misbehavior.

A review of 73 of these programs delivered universally to all students within participating schools found that treatment students exhibited significantly lower levels of aggressive and disruptive behavior, including a seven percent reduction in physical fighting on school grounds. Similar positive results were found in 47 studies of social information processing programs delivered as pull-out programs to targeted students.

Twelve studies of interventions aimed at improving classroom-wide behavior showed that, on average, students in classrooms exposed to behavior management interventions demonstrated less disruptive behavior compared to their peers.

...targeting bullying led to a decrease of 20-23 percent at the selected school sites

There is also evidence on the effectiveness of specific problem behaviors of bullying and dating violence. Forty-four anti-bullying programs implemented in 16 different countries were found to be effective, and resulted in average decreases of 20-23 percent in bullying and 17-20 percent in victimization.

Evidence from 12 studies of sexual violence prevention programs shows that, on the positive side, participants in the programs showed increased knowledge of sexual

violence and awareness of appropriate approaches to conflict resolution. On the negative side, the limited number of studies focused on actual violent behaviors and victimization did not show any positive effects.

The Campbell Reviews included in this review varied in topic, the sample sizes of the included studies, and methodology. In the case of each of the reviews, although much had been written about each topic, the actual impact analysis reported on here relied on the relatively small number of studies conducted with rigorous research methods.

The review of school refusal found only eight studies of sufficient quality while the review of sexual violence prevention programs only found 12 studies. Thus, there is still much to learn in most of these areas.

Because of the limited evidence, and the wide variety of programs considered in each review it is not possible to make recommendations on which particular anti-bullying program, or which anti-truancy program, is the most effective.

It is possible, based on the evidence, to identify some factors influencing the success of these programs. For example, in some cases, program duration and the frequency of the intervention were related to program success.

Future work

Overall, the evidence looks promising, with improved outcomes for students that participate in these interventions. However, one of they key findings that emerges from these reviews of the existing literature is that there is, in some areas, very little rigorous empirical evidence currently available to inform the development of potentially effective interventions to improve student behaviors.

Moreover, in some cases the results are small relative to the scope of the problem (e.g. truancy) and in other cases the changes in attitudes did not result in changed behaviors (e.g. sexual violence).

While the overall results are mildly encouraging, it is important to remember that they are based on a relatively small number of studies and much more rigorous evidence is needed to guide policymakers and school leaders as they seek to design programs to improve student behaviors.

Included Campbell reviews

De La Rue, L., Polanin. J.R., Espelage, D.L., and Pigott, T.D. School-based interventions to reduce dating and sexual violence: A systematic review. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2014:07

Farrington, D. P., Ttofi, M.M. School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2009:06

Maynard, B.R., Brendel, K.E., Bulanda, J.J., Heyne, D., Thomspon, A., and Pigott, T.D. Psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary students: A systematic review Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2015:12

Maynard, B.R., McCrea K.T., Pigott T.D., and Kelly M.S. Indicated truancy interventions: Effects on school attendance among chronic truant students Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2012:10

Oliver, R., Wehby, J,. and Reschly, D.J. Teacher classroom management practices: Effects on disruptive or aggressive student behavior Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2011:04

Wilson, S.J. and Lipsey, M. The effects of school-based social information processing interventions on aggressive behavior, Part I: Universal Programs Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2006:05

About Campbell

The Campbell Collaboration is an international network devoted to producing a world library of systematic reviews of research to inform social policy and practice decisions and improve human wellbeing worldwide.

This Campbell Policy Brief was written by Gary Ritter.

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