

What's Happening in Utah to Help Students At Risk for Antisocial Behavior?

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Random, unprovoked violence has put our society on edge and made unsafe places of our neighborhoods and schools (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995). During a recent year, 3 million acts of violence and theft took place in our nation's public schools. Each day more than 100,000 weapons are brought to school and approximately 40 children and youth are wounded or killed by these weapons (Children's Defense Fund, 1990). Gang activity is rampant throughout the United States and is associated with a dramatic rise in criminal activity among our

youth (Walker, et al., 1995).

Nearly 2,000 gang members from 70 different gangs are known to come from neighborhoods in and around the city of Ogden, Utah, which has an approximate population of 180,000 residents (Weber/Ogden Metro Gang Unit, 1997). Recent increases have been noted in virtually all categories of criminal activity throughout the state, but alarming increases of 9.5%, 17%, and 11% have been seen during the past year in violent crimes, property crimes and aggravated assaults, respectively (Crime in Utah, 1996; A Summit on

Crime, 1997). Statistically, it is more likely for a person residing in the mainly urban Wasatch Front areas of Utah to be a victim of most types of crime than it is for a resident of New York City (Hutchings & Smith, 1997). Property crimes in Utah committed by juveniles, as well as juvenile arrest rates, continue at levels well above the national average (Utah Commission on Crime and Juvenile Justice, 1997). In fact, Utah's juvenile arrest rate ranks among the highest in this country (A Summit on Crime, 1997; Hutchings & Smith, 1997). Arising from a concern about safety in our

schools and neighborhoods, two programs have been developed at the Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (SCYFAR), a collaboration of the Center for Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, and the Utah State University Research Foundation. Following is a description of each program and its effects on students at risk for antisocial behavior.

Prevention Plus: Preventing Antisocial Behavior Among Youth Who Are At Risk

Recent research has shown that the risk of developing patterns of various types of antisocial behavior among youth, including the use of alcohol and other drugs, aggressive and violent behavior, and gang activity, can be lessened by developing certain protective assets. These include social and self-management skills, academic proficiency, and improved relationships with family members and school personnel (Gardner & Resnik, 1996; Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Schorr, 1988). In an effort to develop these assets, the Prevention Plus project

offered one to three class periods each day for middle- and high-school students identified as experiencing substantial risk for antisocial behavior. During these class periods, specially trained staff members emphasized the development of crucial social skills, taught methods for self-management, strengthened academic skills, nurtured positive relationships, and assisted youth to solve problems.

The Prevention Plus project began in 1994 and continued for two years with funds from the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Program. The funds were awarded to Utah State University's Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (SCYFAR). The SCYFAR Institute entered into a contractual relationship with Ogden City School District to staff two at-risk programs, one at Ben Lomond High School and the other at Mound Fort Middle School. This partnership set the stage for another two-year project which began in 1996. The second project, known as the School and Family Empower-

ment (S.A.F.E.) Project, is also described in this issue.

The Prevention Plus Model

Teaching to fluency. The fundamental principle upon which this approach was based is that success in school and other settings results from fluent performance of crucial skills—social, academic, and self-management. (Fluency in performance is a product of continual teaching and many practice opportunities, especially for emerging skills.)

Each skill is introduced to students in a directive fashion, usually in a small group. The teacher describes the steps comprising each skill, along with a rationale for the skill's use and an explanation of when the skill should be used. Opportunities are then provided to practice the individual elements of the skill, as well as the complete skill with all steps intact.

Teaching social skills opportunistically. Once the social skills have been introduced in this fashion and practiced briefly, most of the remaining teaching takes the form of opportunistic teaching episodes, each one lasting from one to three minutes and

occurring at virtually any time throughout the day and in any setting throughout the school. Each of these teaching events occurs when a teacher or other staff member recognizes that the student has either attempted to use a previously taught skill but has failed to perform the skill correctly or has missed an opportunity to use the skill. Upon recognizing a teaching opportunity, the teacher:

- a. approaches the student in a positive manner, using appropriate verbal and nonverbal interpersonal skills and displaying a positive attitude and regard for the learner;
- b. describes the reason he or she is intervening (i.e., to point out the steps of the skill that were not present or the opportunity for using the skill that was not recognized by the student);
- c. describes and labels the skill and all its steps;
- d. offers rationales or reasons for the skill (e.g., benefits to the student and others for using the skill or problems resulting from failure to use the skill);
- e. invites on-the-spot practice of the skill with appropriate evaluation and

praise for cooperation; and f. furnishes specific feedback on performance, with praise for even slight improvements.

In the two Prevention Plus programs in Ogden School District, efforts to build social skills through teaching, practice, and praise occurred daily across and throughout the various school and home environments for those students identified as being at risk. Since interactions between students and peers, teachers, and other adults occurred throughout the day, many learning opportunities were available. The adult tailored each teaching episode to the unique learning needs of the student and to the context in which the skill could and should be used. Teaching occurred during class periods, in the hallways between classes, before and after school, in the lunchroom, in the administrative offices, and in other locations in and around the school.

Teaching self-management skills. Many students who are at risk display disruptive and oppositional behavior at school. Students who were enrolled in the

Prevention Plus classes learned to manage their behavior in the classroom by monitoring it and bringing it in line with the teacher's expectations (Young, West, Smith & Morgan, 1992). Each class period was divided into intervals of 10 to 20 minutes. During each interval, students monitored their behavior, compared it to the expectations stated in the classroom rules posted in each room, and rated how closely their behavior met the standard for that interval using a scale from one to five. The teacher also rated the student during each interval. When the student's and teacher's ratings were compared, points were awarded for ratings that matched; more points for exact matches, and fewer points for "next door" matches. Once the student's ratings consistently matched the teacher's, the self-monitoring intervals were lengthened. This effectively resulted in fewer and fewer rating comparisons during the class period. Student behavior continued to improve in the classroom even when rating matches were completed only occasionally. This procedure proved to be

effective not only in establishing accurate self-appraisal skills but in reducing the need for other strategies to limit classroom disruptions.

Teaching academic skills.

Academic skills were developed through a combination of tutoring students in the work assigned in their other classes and direct instruction in reading (Corrective Reading: Decoding Strategies; Englemann, Johnson, Carnine, Meyer, Becker, & Eisele, 1988), writing (Expressive Writing 2; Englemann & Silbert, 1985) and spelling (Corrective Spelling Through Morphographs; Dixon & Englemann, 1979). Some additional practice was provided in the form of precision teaching (West & Young, 1992; West, Young, & Spooner, 1992) for certain critical reading and math skills. Precision teaching employs brief but intensive, focused, and timed practice sessions that are intended to increase the fluency of performance.

Evidences of Impact

Over the course of the project's two years, data were collected from three groups of

students in grades six through nine on various measures of social skill use, antisocial behavior, and academic achievement. The three groups were: (a) a no-treatment group, (b) a treatment group whose members were involved in Prevention Plus only during the project's second year, and (c) a treatment group whose members were involved in Prevention Plus for two years. Group (a) consisted of 22 youth in grades six through nine who were referred by their principals, but were not included in any Prevention Plus classes. Group (b) consisted of 70 students, all judged to be at risk, who were included in Prevention Plus classes during the project's second year. The 80 students in Group (c) were identified as being at risk early in the project's first year and were included in Prevention Plus classes for some or all of the two years of the project.

Pre- and posttest measures for groups (a) and (b) were collected at approximately the same time, while the pretest measures for group (c) were collected one year earlier (near the beginning of the project). However, the

posttest measures for all groups were collected at the same time, at the conclusion of the project's second year. Thus, only pretest data on the 2-year treatment group (group c) were collected during the project's first year, while pre- and posttest data were collected on both the no-treatment group and the 1-year treatment group during the second year of the project.

Pretest measures for all groups reveal some differences between the groups; therefore, any differences noted in the posttest measures may be attributed partially to the differences that existed independent of exposure to Prevention Plus. Generally, the 2-year treatment group fared less well on all pretest measures when compared with the other two groups. This finding is not surprising since these students were the first to be identified by their teachers as having considerable risk for antisocial behavior and, as such, would probably be regarded as the most deviant. On pretest measures of skill or achievement, this group consistently scored lower than the other two groups. On pre-measures of antisocial behavior, this

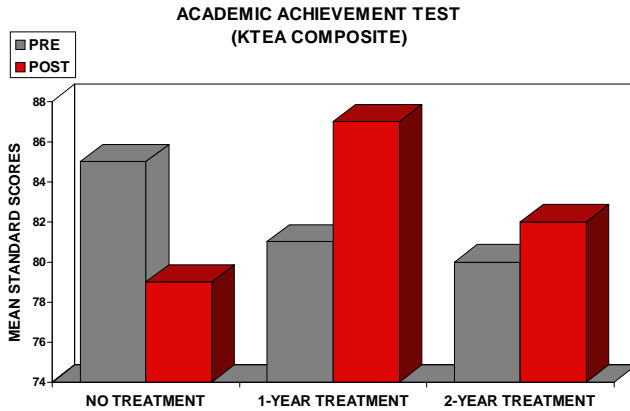


Figure 1.

group scored higher. The other two groups (a and b) were found to be quite similar to one another and comparisons of their performance can be more direct.

A visual analysis of the data (Figures 1-7) indicates that both treatment groups made substantially more improvement across all measures than did the no-treatment group.

Academic achievement.

Academic achievement was measured using the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA-Brief Form) (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1985). A comparison of changes in the mean standard score for each group from pre- to posttest reveals improvement for both treatment groups

compared to the no-treatment group, which actually scored lower on the posttest than on the pretest (Figure 1). This effect was confirmed using an analysis of normal curve equivalents (NCE).

The normal curve equivalent scale is a linear transformation of a percentile scale.

It is similar to stanines, but its units of measurement are fine enough to detect small gains. Furthermore, NCEs are units of equal interval, a characteristic that makes possible comparisons across the entire range of the scale. Percentiles, on the other hand, do not represent an equal interval scale. One percentile point change near either end of the scale represents much larger differences in skills than does one point near the middle (Tallmadge & Wood, 1980).

The improvement in academic performance noted for both treatment groups, although only modest, is more significant when compared against the no-treatment group whose scores actually declined. Furthermore,

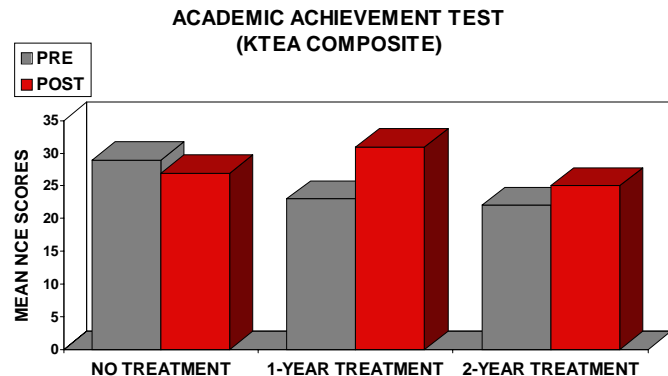


Figure 2.

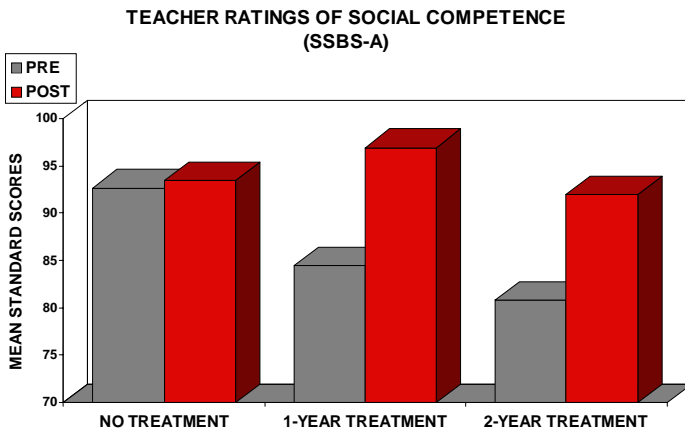


Figure 3.

whereas the scores for the 2-year treatment group reflect only a 2-point and 3-point gain on standard scores and NCE scores, respectively, over the two years, the scores from a mid-term assessment (after one year in the program) reveal 5- and 7-point gains in standard scores and NCE scores. Interestingly, this analysis is suggestive of the often-noted characteristics of an at-risk population, including volatility and other types of erratic behavior.

Social Competence.

Although very important for the success of youth at risk, academic performance was emphasized somewhat less in the Prevention Plus Program than social/interpersonal and

self-management skills, which were regarded as essential or critical skills. The impact of our efforts to strengthen these skills is reflected in an analysis of measures of social compe-

tence and antisocial behavior. Three measures of social competence were obtained for students in all three groups: teacher ratings using the School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS-A) (Merrill, 1993); parent ratings using the Home and Community Social Behavior Scales (HCSBS-A) (Merrill, 1997); and student self-ratings using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Figures 3, 4, and 5 reveal consistent improvements from pretest to posttest for both treatment groups, with somewhat greater improvement for the 2-year treatment group. The no-treatment group made little improvement on either

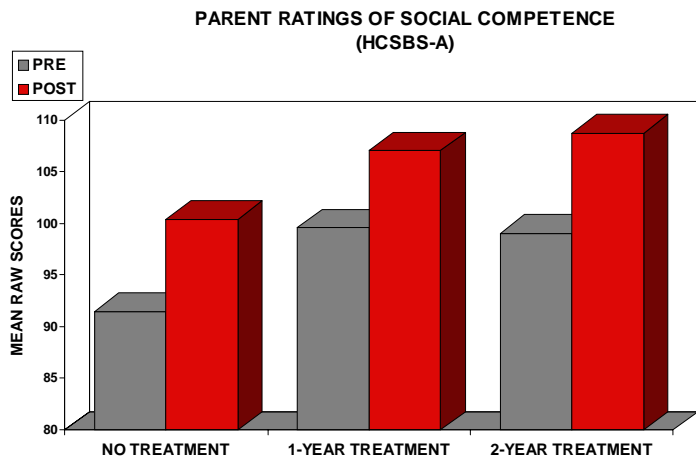


Figure 4.

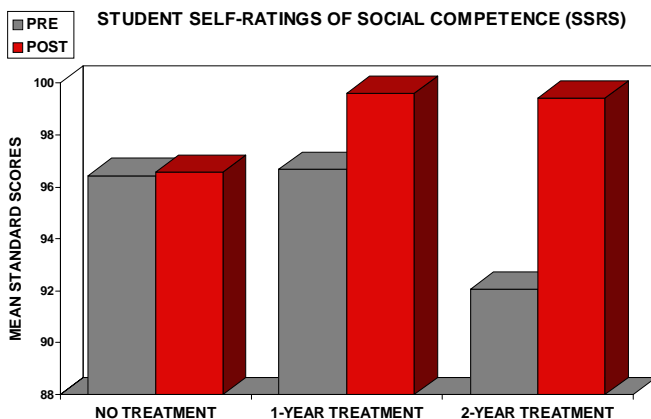


Figure 5.

the teacher ratings or the student self-ratings, but did display improvement on parent ratings similar in magnitude to those achieved by the two treatment groups.

Antisocial Behavior.

Measures of antisocial behavior were obtained from teachers and parents using the antisocial behavior scales of the SSBS-B and the HCSBS-B, respectively. In all cases, substantially greater gains were made by the two treatment groups compared to the no-treatment group (Figures 6 and 7).

Thus, we see that students who participated in Prevention Plus for portions of either one or two years experienced considerably

more improvement in academic achievement and social competence, and more substantial reductions in the measures of antisocial behavior than did students who were also at risk but who

did not participate in Prevention Plus. The results of this analysis were confirmed by the subjective evaluations of school personnel, including school administrators and teachers who had somewhat less contact with the students than those whose opinions were represented in the various measures of social competence and antisocial behavior.

Although these data strongly indicate that Prevention Plus was effective in improving the outlook for students regarded to be at risk for chronic patterns of antisocial behavior, we served only a small portion of the students in these two schools who were exposed to signifi-

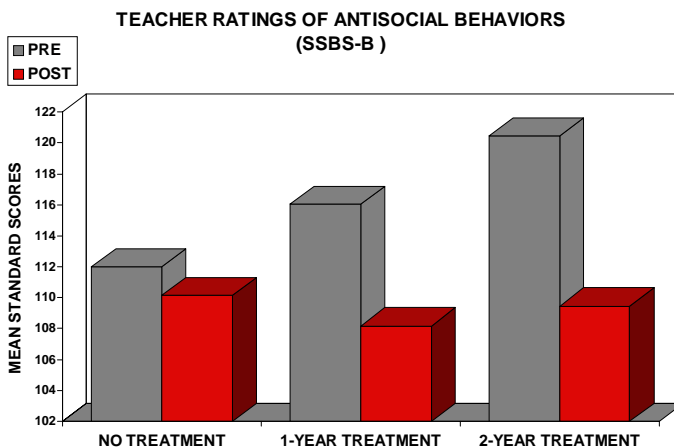


Figure 6.

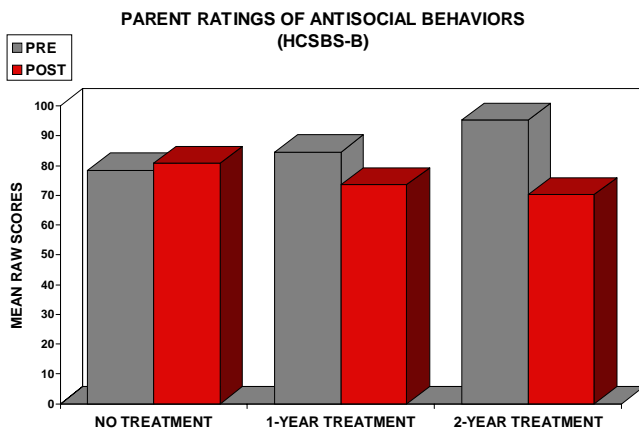


Figure 7.

cant risk. The needs of the more typical student whose exposure to risk factors was less intense and of the student whose exposure to risk was especially great also needed to be addressed. The following description of the S.A.F.E. Project addresses how these needs are being met.

The School and Family Empowerment (S.A.F.E) Project

The S.A.F.E. Project was established in two Ogden, Utah, middle schools with funds from a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communi-

ties Program (Federal Activities Program). As with the Prevention Plus project, S.A.F.E. funds were awarded to Utah State University's Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (SCYFAR). The project represents additional partnerships with Ogden City School District and HeartSprings, Inc. of Tucson, Arizona, which developed an elementary-school program that has produced substantial reductions in various indicators of school violence, including office referrals, nurses' referrals, and reports of critical incidences (Embry, Flannery, Vazsonyi, Powell, & Atha, 1996). As a result of

these partnerships, more than 1,300 students from at-risk neighborhoods are learning to interact with one another peacefully and to promote an ethic of peace and cooperation in their schools and neighborhoods.

Three Levels of Intensity for Three Levels of Risk

The S.A.F.E. Project consists of three separate but coordinated efforts to prevent violent and other antisocial behavior by establishing a standard and expectation of cooperation and helpfulness. Each effort employs a different level of intensity and emphasizes strategies designed to promote peaceful and cooperative behavior.

PeaceBuilders—A schoolwide effort for all students. The first level of prevention involves all the students in the school and is known as PeaceBuilders (Embry, et al., 1996). This approach is a formal adaptation to middle schools of the elementary-school program developed by HeartSprings, Inc. This schoolwide program seeks to change the school climate by promoting cooperative and supportive social behavior among

students and adults. Students learn six basic principles and the corresponding behaviors that reflect them: first, praise people; second, give up put-downs; third, seek wise people as advisors and friends; fourth, notice and correct the hurts we cause; fifth, right the wrongs caused by others; and sixth, help others. School personnel and other adults model and reinforce the behaviors at school, at home, and in public places throughout the community.

Underlying the PeaceBuilders approach is the theory that youth violence can be reduced "by initiating prevention early in childhood, increasing children's resilience, and reinforcing positive behaviors. Further, aggressive behavior can be reduced by altering the school environment to emphasize rewards and praise for prosocial behavior" (Embry, et al., 1996). Learning activities are built into the school environment and the daily interactions among students, teachers, and administrative staff. All participants are taught a common language and provided models of coopera-

tive and supportive behavior, environmental cues to signal such behavior, opportunities to rehearse it, and rewards for practicing it.

Prevention Plus—focusing on the needs of students at greater risk. In spite of efforts to alter the school climate and to promote cooperative and supportive behavior among all students, some students appear to need more intensive prevention interventions. Compared to the majority of students in school, these students have been exposed to more environmental risk factors or their exposure has been over a longer period of time and, as a result, they are more likely to develop patterns of chronic antisocial behavior. In fact, they may already display certain behaviors indicative of early patterns of antisocial behavior, such as occasional disruptive or oppositional behavior. For these students, the second level of preventive programming is appropriate. It is known as Prevention Plus (previously described in this article). Students in Prevention Plus participate in concentrated teaching and learning situations during at least one class period each

day. These classes emphasize the development of academic, social or interpersonal, and self-management skills.

Partners—an intensive effort for students at greatest risk. For those students in school for whom the previously described prevention activities are not sufficient to overcome the influence of critical risk factors in their homes, neighborhoods, or other community settings, we have developed the Partners program. Built upon the same theoretical underpinnings as PeaceBuilders and Prevention Plus, Partners attempts to provide many more opportunities for students to become fluent in critical skills required for success in mainstream community settings. This program is designed for students who are most at risk, and who may already have become disassociated with the school through chronic truancy, suspension, or expulsion. These students may engage in behaviors that threaten other students, teachers, and administrators or regularly challenge the generally accepted standards and norms for appropriate school behavior. Partners

offers these students similar intensive skill-building strategies to those found in Prevention Plus, but these students will participate in classes from two to four hours per day. Additionally, Partners students may be assigned personal mentors to help them overcome the academic and interpersonal challenges they experience each day. Mentors may be high school or university students selected according to their ability to model the behaviors that lead to success. Each mentor receives training in relationship-building skills, supportive and encouraging behaviors, and in strategies designed to strengthen the skills and attributes needed by Partners students.

Prevention Interventions Must be Both Comprehensive and Intensive

Prevention interventions, even those that are extremely potent in a single environment or setting, are unlikely to produce significant and lasting change if they don't appear in several of the interacting and overlapping environments experienced by children and youth at risk. Typical single-faceted

prevention efforts presented in only one location or setting have produced only limited success and usually only in the short term. Many social skills prevention interventions reported in the research literature have been introduced to students in only a health class or social studies class. Even peer influence resistance skills training delivered in this fashion has been shown to have only short-term effects on the problem behavior in general populations; it may have even less impact among higher risk groups (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). On the other hand, comprehensive approaches that include parent and community involvement as well as classroom instruction and counseling have been found to be more likely to achieve desired changes across the variety of environments (U.S. General Accounting Office Report, HRD-91-27, 1990).

The model of prevention programming contained in the S.A.F.E. Project is comprehensive in its scope and intensive in its application. It emphasizes the acquisition of critical skills and the motivation to employ the skills over

time and in a variety of settings. Skills are taught and strengthened in various environments, including the classroom and principal's office, the community and at home, by systematically altering the conditions within each environment to make them more conducive to teaching and learning. Skills taught in one environment are retaught and practiced in other environments. This approach enhances the probability that crucial skills and behaviors will be developed to a level of proficiency that their use will be generalized over time and across environmental settings.

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