

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

Internalizing Behavior Problems: Strong Kids Curriculum Responds to the Hidden Challenge

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Educators assume a role in helping all children and youth develop appropriate social and emotional skills—especially, those who have significant emotional or behavioral problems. Approximately 20% of children and youth experience mental health challenges, the most common being anxiety, followed by social withdrawal and mood problems, all of which are internalizing behaviors.

The Strong Kids curriculum is designed for teaching social and emotional skills, promoting resilience, strengthening assets, and increasing coping skills of students in Grades 4 to 6, including those with internalizing behavior problems. This curriculum consists of 12 partially scripted and highly structured lessons, similar in format and style, each lasting approximately 45 to 50 minutes; these lessons may be used with high-functioning, typical, at-risk, or emotionally-behaviorally disordered students. The following guidelines explain the framework and steps that can be adopted by schools for selecting students, training educators, implementing the curriculum, and evaluating the outcomes within the school context.

STEP 1: SELECT STUDENTS

First, students need to be identified who tend to have internalizing behaviors and will benefit from the intervention. Internalizing behavior problems include depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Because these behaviors are not as visible or disruptive as externalizing behavior disorders such as defiance and aggression, they tend to be more challenging to identify. Therefore, a proactive approach, which requires a systematic screening effort by school faculty and staff, is more likely to identify such students. The screeners listed in these guidelines fulfill these criteria. Effective behavior screeners include the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (Walker & Severson, 1992), School Social Behavior Scales (Merrell, 2002), the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1987), Conners's Rating Scales-Revised (Conners, 1997), the Scale for Assessing Emotional Disturbance (Epstein & Cullinan, 1998), and the model known as response to intervention.

STEP 2: TRAIN EDUCATORS

We propose a variation of how to train educators to implement the Strong Kids curriculum: Training school psychologists and other educators the Strong Kids curriculum and instructional procedures can be conducted in approximately a 3 hour-long session. During the training-the-trainer session, the leader presents a lesson from the curriculum and shares all the materials using explicit instruction techniques—this includes defining skills and stating expectations.¹ To check for understanding, the trainer asks the trainees to complete a written assessment of the curriculum instruction. This assessment is done to ensure that those implementing the intervention understand the process and the intended outcomes of the lessons. This modeling and assessment will also increase treatment integrity.

STEP 3: GATHER MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

After the students are identified and the educators are trained, the materials and resources necessary to implement the Strong Kids are located and gathered—including a small-group setting (tables or desks and chairs), an overhead projector, screen, overhead markers,

transparencies, whiteboard and markers, pencils, and some edible reinforcers (optional).

STEP 4: DELIVER CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

For students who are identified with internalizing behavior problems, we recommend that the Strong Kids curriculum be taught in a pullout environment, apart from their general education classrooms, so that they receive more focused and individualized instruction than what is likely to occur in a large-group context. Students attend a class where the lessons can be taught over a 6-week period, two lessons per week (or once per week for 12 weeks), consisting of explicit instruction paired with interactive activities.² The titles and content focus of the 12 basic lessons in Strong Kids follow (see Merrell, Carrizales, Feuerborn, Gueldner, & Tran, 2007):

Lesson 1—Emotional strength training: Students learn important terms related to the materials, including emotion, self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

Lessons 2 and 3—Understanding feelings: The objective is to improve vocabulary, awareness, and resiliency of students' emotional understanding.

Lesson 4—Dealing with anger: During this lesson, students learn a six-step model for effectively dealing with anger.

Lesson 5—Understanding other people's feelings: Students learn that it is imperative to understand the feelings of others to solve conflict.

Lessons 6 and 7—Thinking clearly: These lessons help students recognize positive and negative thought patterns and how they contribute to our moods, choices, and actions in positive and negative ways.

Lesson 8—Thinking positively: The objective of this lesson is for students to learn how positive thinking can redirect negative thinking into more optimistic and productive thought patterns.

Lesson 9—Resolving conflict and solving "people problems": Students learn a problem-solving model—specifically, the skills of compromising, deal making, and brainstorming.

Lesson 10—Letting go of stress: This lesson provides an opportunity for students to discuss what triggers stress, how to identify stress, and how to relax and effectively cope with stress.

Lesson 11—Setting goals: Students learn a six-step process for setting and achieving goals and discuss the positive results of goal setting.

Lesson 12—Finishing up: Students discuss what they have learned and celebrate the goals they have set and accomplished.

STEP 5: PROVIDING CURRICULUM MODIFICATIONS

We recommend a few modifications in the Strong Kids presentation format to effectively meet the needs of students with internalizing behavior concerns. One recommended modification is the addition of an anticipatory set as a way to introduce the topic and engage the students. Most anticipatory sets involve some activity: For example, for the lesson on emotions, the instructor can present three face pictures and ask the students which feeling they associate with each picture—happy, sad, worried, or scared. As suggested in the Strong Kids manual, a homework completion reinforcement program can also be used. A proposed way to adopt this modification is for the participants to complete the homework assignment from the previous lesson and write their names on slips of paper. At the beginning or end of each lesson, the instructors can draw the names of two or three students to receive an appropriate reward, which should help the students generalize and maintain the skills.

STEP 6: EVALUATING OUTCOMES

As deemed appropriate, various instruments can be used to assess the impact of Strong Kids on students' emotional and social skills. We recommend the Teacher's Report Form, a 113-item behavioral checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001); a shortened version of the Internalizing Symptom Scale for Children, a self-report measure of internalizing symptoms (Merrell & Walters, 1998); and the Strong Kids 20-item Knowledge Test, a self-report outcome measure developed by Merrell and colleagues (2007). Participants' perceptions of the Strong Kids curriculum can also be measured using a brief social validity survey.

CONCLUSION

The expectation is that by implementing these proposed guidelines associated with the Strong Kids curriculum in schools, educators can effectively address the needs of students. Specifically, educators can successfully teach social and emotional skills, promote resilience, strengthen assets, and increase the coping skills of students in Grades 4 to 6—especially, those with internalizing behavior problems. **EDPS**

NOTES

1. For information on how to purchase the Strong Kids curriculum and instructional materials, see <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu>.
2. Additional details about the content and delivery method associated with Strong Kids can be found at <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu>.

REFERENCES

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