Preferred Practice #1: Second Step

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INTRODUCTION

Second Step is a program that claims to bring students to a place where they are ready to learn in a more focused way no matter what the circumstances in their lives are. It is a social emotional learning program that teaches children foundational skills so that they can eventually benefit from the pedagogical instruction. Children learn to: listen to and follow directions, focus on their work, regulate and manage their emotions (i.e. inhibit their impulses when they are in a situation that they have to exercise self-control), behave more respectfully (i.e. be able to take another person’s perspective), get along better with peers so that when problems arise they are better equipped to solve them. One of the program’s new components from K to grade 5 is the focus on the executive functions development in a built-in, implicit way. In other words it is a combination of skills related to life-long competencies which are also conducive to better academic results as students are able to focus and apply themselves to their work. Drawing from a well-established body of literature according to which students enrolled in social emotional programs have better academic achievement and almost half discipline problems compared to those who do not, Second Step constitutes an engaging, fun and teacher-friendly curricula.

THE COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN (CFC) and SECOND STEP

Second Step was created by the Committee For Children (CFC) a nonprofit organization seeking to foster the social and emotional development and well-being of children through advocacy and education. Through research-based and social-emotional learning materials their aim is to help children to succeed in school and in life, in this way building a world in which children can grow up to be peaceful, kind and responsible citizens. From Illinois to Iraq and Chile to California millions of children in 70 countries have been taught skills that help them stay safe, manage their emotions, solve problems, avoid risky behavior, and improve their academics. 1986 was the year of the birth of the Second Step program and when the name “Committee for Children” was adopted. By 2011, its fourth edition was released with additional skills for learning. Even though Second Step was originally created as a violence prevention program, and while it still effectively serves that purpose, that is no longer its main focus: It is designed to improve children’s social and emotional competence by helping them develop skills in the areas of empathy (concepts explored in the Talking About
Touching program), perspective taking, problem solving, impulse control and anger management to help children avoid violent behavior (Holsen, Smith & Frey 2008). The design has also been updated and streamlined, with many of the teaching resources located online for easy access. In addition to second step, a number of other successful intervention programs have been developed including: Talking About Touching, Personal Safety and Decision Making, and Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program (Committee for Children, 2012).

**AGE RANGE – TYPE OF INTERVENTION**

The curriculum has developmentally sequenced lessons designed for children ranging from pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8. Second Step is typically implemented as a universal intervention for a general population (level 1 intervention), but it may be implemented as a targeted intervention for a small group of students (level 2), or individual students (level 3). It has been found to be effective over a diverse population across socio-economic and ethnic student groups in both the United States and Norway (Cooke, Ford, Bourke, Newell, & Lapidus, 2007; Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000; Holsen, Smith, & Frey, 2008; Taub, 2001). It is beneficial for everyone participating in the program, yet some students may require more targeted interventions to meet their unique needs.

**HOW TO ACQUIRE SECOND STEP and PRICING**

To order the Second Step program, visit the CFC website and follow the appropriate links for the corresponding age group. There are five age-groupings within the second step program: Early learning (for children under the age of 5), kindergarten-grade 1, grades 2-3, grades 4-5, and grades 6-8. The kits range in price from 270 for grades 2-3 to 339 USD for grades 6-9 without tax or shipping fees (Committee for Children, 2012). Schools are encouraged to place multiple kits orders in this way receiving a discount.

**MATERIAL INCLUDED**

Second Step kits for early learning through Grade 3 include 11" x 17" color photo cards, unit cards for teachers, music CDs, DVDs (grade 1-3 only), colorful classroom posters, listening rules and feelings cards, puppets and stuffed animals, teaching materials notebook, and student handouts. In the kits for grades 4-5 a teacher will find fully scripted 8.5" x 11" lesson cards, academic integration activities, school-based videos and music videos on DVD, short follow up activities, and colorful
posters. For grades 6-8 lesson descriptions, DVDs, colorful posters, academic integration activities, family letters, and formative and summative assessments are included in the kits. Free online features such as training videos, supplemental worksheets, materials to email to students' families, electronic versions of teaching materials including assessment tools and program implementation guides, and videos to help get staff and parents ready for the program are included in all of them (Committee for Children, 2012).

**SETTINGS AND CURRICULUM**

The Early Learning program is designed specifically for multiple-age early learning classrooms such as daycares, preschools, and pre-Kindergartens. Through 28 weekly themes five seven-minute activities are completed in a sequential order, focusing on improving children’s self-regulation skills and socio-emotional competence. Learning and listening expectations are outlined in kindergarten and grade 1 program and kids learn such skills as how to identify feelings, manage strong emotions, solve problems, and how to get along with others. For grades 2 and 3 lessons focus on helping students improve their ability to pay attention, listen, and ignore distractions. Students are taught how to respond to others with empathy, manage strong feelings, and solve problems. Moving on to grades 4 and 5, lessons are built based on previously learned skills again with a focus on empathy, emotion management and problem-solving skills and strategies to use in social and academic settings, creating a bridge with the middle school program. (Committee for Children, 2012).

In middle school students learn how to make appropriate choices and stay engaged in school despite dangers of substance abuse, bullying, cyber bullying, and peer pressure. When reaching grade 6 kids focus on perspective taking, juggling responsibilities, solving problems peacefully and how to recognize and prevent bullying, brain-body-emotions connections, and staying free from alcohol and other drugs. 7 graders learn topics around making good decisions, staying in control, giving support, responding to physical and cyber bullying, refusing sexual harassment, coping with stress, and the myths and facts about substance abuse. By grade 8 the focus of lessons revolves around leadership, setting goals, being open-minded, bullying within relationships and groups, labels, stereotypes, prejudice, identifying hopes and plans and positive self-talk to avoid substance abuse (Committee for Children, 2012).
BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTATION AND HOW TO DO IT

Requiring little preparation time is one of the biggest benefits to the second step program from a teacher’s perspective as, in order to implement it, all you have to do is open the package and follow the logically sequenced curriculum. Each lesson, unit, and program is clearly laid out, step-by-step, with easy to use materials. One of their fun elements – for both teachers and students - lies in their interactive nature through the use of DVDs, CDs and emphasis on role-playing. Student worksheets can be photocopied and are user-friendly. Finally, there are letters that explain to caregivers the benefits of the program, along with activities for families to try at home included in the package.

SAMPLE LESSON

A sample lesson for a grade 4 class can be found on the CFC website that outlines a typical lesson with what its concept is, its objectives, the materials necessary and useful preparation guidelines. A quick review of previously learned skills and examples are first discussed followed by a five-minute introduction on the topic of the new lesson including a brief audio clip or scene of children acting on a DVD may be played. Questions are asked about what the students saw and heard and students would then guess what the children may have been feeling in certain situations, and how to solve the given problem. Correct answers should positively be reinforced and students should be guided to individually correct their answers. Then the teacher can hold up a scene on a card such as children appearing to fight on a basketball court which students are asked to interpret by saying what they saw, feelings this might have evoked, offer solutions to problems, and act out their own scene with appropriate behaviour. The teacher would teach a problem-solving skill by modeling it with a few students or having them watch an appropriate scene on the DVD. This process may take up to 20 minutes. A handout can subsequently be administered with questions about the skills learned leading to brainstorming of experiences where students may have been in a situation similar to what they witnessed. This should take less than ten minutes to complete. The final component of the lesson would be a quick two-minute review of the topic(s) covered. Students are encouraged to discuss the lesson with their family at home that night (Committee for Children, 2012).
A benefit of having sequential lessons is that knowledge is built upon a pre-existing foundation, and skills are constantly being reinforced and reviewed. Therefore, if new students come into a school where the program is already being implemented despite their being at an initial disadvantage, they can quickly catch up on the previously missed concepts.

**TEACHER TRAINING**

Formal training is not required, but it is strongly encouraged. Online videos can assist teachers or experts may come to a school and do a one-day workshop with staff. It is also possible for a school representative to receive training so as to become a certified second step program trainer and provide the workshops themselves and therefore act as the local expert should any questions arise or assistance be required. Staff should be encouraged to refer to the website for new lesson/activity ideas, gain access to current research, and to ensure they keep up to date with best current teaching techniques of the second step program.

**SCHOOL-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES**

One of the biggest challenges to the implementation of such a program is getting buy-in from key stakeholders. Second Step has been proven most effective when entire school populations implement it across all grades; therefore, staff support for the program is crucial. To get staff buy-in, administration wishing to use it should ensure that staff are provided with the appropriate training and release time to those requiring additional training. Having all students in a school participate in the program allows for the creation of a common language, establishes expectations for individuals to adhere to while in the school community, and ideally in the greater community as a whole. The time commitment required is also important. There needs to be at least a year in which the full implementation occurs and then continual use must exist (Taub, 2001) ensuring that students will perform the appropriate skills when time calls for it. The culture of the school is the only way to achieve that through full adherence of the staff and support from parents. By doing this, the students will be able to generalize this new culture of behaviour in settings outside of the school. Consequently, this means that the parents need to be involved. To get parent buy-in, evening information sessions should be held to educate them about the benefits of the program and any concerns should be addressed in a timely fashion. Most importantly, websites and handouts containing
information about Second Step and empirical evidence should be provided. According to Neace, W., & Munoz, M. (2012) research confirms that school and family are the two most important social-emotional learning environments for children which can promote either healthy or unhealthy development.

Evaluation of the program can be realized in many ways. Teachers are provided with both formative and summative forms to assess the students’ understanding on the given topics or create their own assessment forms. School staff may choose to compare the Office Discipline Referrals (ODR) collected before, during, and after the program to determine whether it is successful. They could also monitor targeted behaviours addressed in the program. Parental feedback should also be encouraged and taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of the Second Step program.

RESEARCH

Cooke, Ford, Bourke, Newell, and Lapidus (2007) implemented the Second Step program in eight elementary schools in a city in Connecticut. Students in grades 3 and 4 represented an ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse population of over 750 participants. Certified Second Step trainers provided workshops and information sessions in order to educate staff on how to implement the program. The researchers provided information on poster boards and flyers both in English and Spanish, and facilitated parent and community workshops to inform the public about the program. In order to meet each school’s unique needs the second step staff met frequently with key stakeholders and held focus groups to tailor the Second Step program.

Evaluative data demonstrated a high satisfaction from teachers, parents, and community members on the training methods and the information presentation. Research assistants conducted over 500 student behaviour observations and handed out student self report questionnaires both before and after the implementation of the program; discipline referrals were also compared pre and post intervention. A high level of fidelity was reported as 80% of teachers implemented every lesson for their grade level Second Step program and two-thirds of the teachers implemented extension activities in addition to the required lessons. The results of the implementation were mostly positive. The authors highlighted that more than one in four students showed specific positive changes on the self-report of pro-social behaviours and attitudes related to Second Step. As expected, students showed
improvements in coping skills, cooperative behaviour, suppression of anger, and consideration of others. Unexpectedly, students demonstrated no change in responsibility and a significant reduction in impulse control over the course of the school year. A small population of students showed an increase in anger and aggression, therefore, more targeted interventions would be appropriate for them.

Limitations in the study identify a lack of control group to compare the results to and no noticeable improvements from the behavioural observations. Another unanticipated result was an increase in discipline referrals which the authors attributed to an increased awareness and understanding of the importance of the referrals and a clarification of the expected behaviours in the school setting. The overall success of the Second Step program found by Cooke, Ford, Bourke, Newell, and Lapidus (2007), is consistent to the positive results demonstrated by Holsen, Smith, and Frey (2008) and Taub (2001). To best demonstrate the effectiveness of the Second Step program, further research should include a randomized control groups and longitudinal studies using the most current revision.

**Some more LIMITATIONS**

Research to suggest the effectiveness of the program for individuals with various disabilities such as Autism, Down Syndrome, and Visual Impairments could not be located. Additionally, the logical and continuous structure of the program would make it rather difficult to implement in multi-grade classrooms.

**CONCLUSION**

There is enormous potential for school-based prevention programs to create positive change, since they can reach large numbers of children at an early age. Educators around the nation are recognizing their unique position to help children learn to be more caring, solve their own problems, and deal with anger in non-violent and productive ways. To this end, while Second Step can be implemented as a targeted intervention, its recommended use is as a universal intervention. It is an easy to implement, interactive, and fun for learners program. The best results occur when entire school populations implement it and as a result, entire staff buy-in is critical to its success. Overall, it has proven effective at reducing students’ social, emotional, and behaviour problems. A number of
studies have reported modest improvements in coping skills, cooperative behaviour, suppression of anger, and consideration of others in school populations.

**References**


