Social and Emotional Learning for Students with Internalizing Behaviors: An Overview and Evaluation of the Strong Kids Curricula

Paul Caldarella and Leslie Williams
Brigham Young University

Mental Health Challenges in Schools

- 20% of students in need of services
- Limited time, academic requirements
- Insufficient resources
- Ineffective programs often are not evidence based (e.g., “fads”)
- Reactive approaches address problems too late, less responsive to treatment

Internalizing Behaviors

- Attempts to regulate internal emotional and cognitive states in a manner that is maladaptive
- Inward expressions of distress can lead to anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints
- Can be difficult to detect through observation
- Associated with negative academic and social outcomes
- Prevalence: higher in girls and adolescents
- May be elicited by the way youth:
  - Think about their experiences (feelings, thoughts, physical symptoms)
  - Behaviorally cope with unpleasant events

A Multi-tiered Approach

- Consider the needs of all students
- Move some resources and effort to help address problems before they become severe
- Three Pronged Prevention Model
  - Affective: emotional education
  - Behavioral: social skills training
  - Cognitive: change thinking

Social Emotional Learning

- Promotes resilience by teaching skills:
  - Recognize and manage emotions
  - Develop care and concern for others
  - Make responsible decisions
  - Form positive relationships
  - Handle challenging situations effectively

Strong Kids Lessons

1. About Strong Kids: Emotional Strength Training
2. Understanding Your Feelings
3. Understanding Your Feelings
4. Dealing with Anger
5. Understanding Other People’sFeelings
6. Clear Thinking
7. The Power of Positive Thinking
8. Solving People Problems
9. Letting Go of Stress
10. Behavior Change:
11. Setting Goals and Staying Active
12. Finishing UP!

Common Thinking Errors

- Binocular vision: looking at things in a way that makes them seem bigger or smaller than they really are
- Black-and-white thinking: looking at things in only extremes or opposite ways. For example, thinking of things as being good or bad, never or always, all or none.
- Dark glasses: thinking about only the negative parts of things.
- Fortune-telling: making predictions about what will happen in the future without enough evidence.
- Making it personal: blaming yourself for things that are not your fault.
- Blame game: blaming others for things you should take responsibility for.

Treatment Fidelity & Social Validity

- Teachers have been able to implement Strong Kids with fidelity
- Most common areas missed: review of previous week’s lesson and wrap-ups
- Teachers, students, and parents have valued the goals, procedures, and outcomes
- Lesson length may be long for younger students
- More supplementary materials needed, particularly with younger students

Tier 1: Strong Start in Preschool

- Effects on teacher ratings of internalizing behaviors and relationship conflict of 52 preschool students

Tier 2: Strong Start/Kids in Elementary School

- Effects on teacher ratings of internalizing symptoms at treatment school (n = 348) vs. control school (n = 266)

Tier 3: Strong Teens in Residential Treatment

- Client, Therapist, and Supervisor Ratings of Resilience Changes over 12 Strong Teens Lessons

“SEL is definitely necessary, since often the kids are coming to us in pieces, and they can’t focus.”
-Elementary teacher