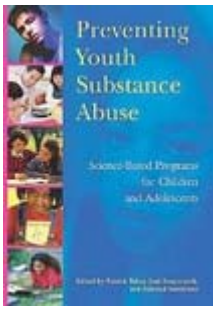
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Encouraging Good or Discouraging Bad?

A Review of

Preventing Youth Substance Abuse: Science-Based Programs for Children and Adolescents
by Patrick Tolan, José Szapocznik, and Soledad Sambrano (Eds.)
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007. 265 pp. ISBN 978-1-59147-307-7. $69.95

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Reviewed by

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Preventing Youth Substance Abuse: Science-Based Programs for Children and Adolescents is an amazing and accessible collection of empirically supported programs that enhance important skills and abilities in both children and youth. Painstaking, intense, and detailed longitudinal research shows that these kinds of interventions enhance parenting, social skills, self-regulation, and academic achievement. The research results are presented in a way that practitioners should appreciate. Succinct summaries highlight the relevant findings without glossing over any potential weaknesses, but the authors never lose readers in details that stray from the book's main focus. The references in each chapter are thorough, so any researcher can find the minutiae pertaining to every study. The descriptions of the interventions are comprehensive enough to let readers know if any specific program might be the one they want to pursue, but these descriptions never reach the tedious level of detail of a treatment manual. The research involved in each program, its evaluation, and the preparation of the chapters will make any reader wonder why there isn't a Nobel Prize for prevention research.

The editors detail a parsimonious model that presents the multifaceted nature of developmental problems as well as the challenges any practitioner would face while trying to implement the programs. This depiction of the model is a genuine contribution in itself. Far too much of what passes for theory in prevention research is depicted as a bunch of boxes filled with bad things connected by arrows to other boxes filled with bad things. The editors show no pretense about this set of approaches being the be-all and end-all of prevention research. Instead, they make intuitive, data-driven recommendations for the significance of family involvement in all programs. The importance of a developmental perspective gets well-deserved emphasis, and the authors consistently reveal why emotion regulation, social skills, and school achievement are ideal outcomes. The interventions focus on a diverse set of groups who vary in age, ethnicity, resources, and locations. The text is filled with the kind of research I love to think that my tax dollars fund. It is a joy to see the emphasis on enhancing resources, instead of on wagging fingers at children until they shudder in fright.

Most of these programs are several steps removed from drug use and abuse, which certainly seems appropriate for working with such young children. However, this focus does create a strange and disturbing subtext about priorities. Many a cynic has suggested that research dollars are devoted to the phenomena we fear the most. Drugs seem as good a villain as any other, but it is obvious that these programs are aimed at decreasing aggression, crime, depression, or any other evil-of-the-month that can serve as a dependent variable. These programs can also be used to enhance self-esteem, school achievement, and even happiness,

and it is obvious that every author contributing to this book knows it. I cannot help but wonder if this research could have been funded with an emphasis on positive outcomes instead of negative ones, or if the title “Ensuring Youth Success” would result in this book selling as many copies. It is sad to think that it is so difficult to fund programs that will improve children's lives without connecting the interventions to terrors related to drug problems.

The chapters that describe the interventions follow a consistent pattern. The book's arrangement makes it easy to compare and contrast the programs so readers can choose the one that seems most appropriate for their needs. It is definitely worth reading them all, however, because novel aspects of one program might make welcome additions to others. Each chapter begins and ends with a vignette about a program participant. I usually find this sort of approach corny and reminiscent of popular self-help paperbacks. However, the vignettes included here actually make the programs more memorable and put a human face to the data. All these chapters then detail the rationale and steps that the investigators use to create these effects. These are clearly not the brief, single-session, magic-bullet programs many of us grew up enduring.

The authors emphasize the necessity of repeated lessons related to parenting, self-regulation, school bonding, and academic skill. There is actually little time in the text devoted to denigrating drugs and much more time committed to developing the skills that will not only prevent negative outcomes but also enhance development. This approach is refreshing and enjoyable. Most chapters then outline the activities of individual sessions. These activities not only respect the limited time that parents and children can devote to the programs, but honestly sound fun. Many nuts-and-bolts caveats appear about nuances that will make the programs most effective—one even comments on how arranging furniture can help keep children on task. Furthermore, all the chapters contain hints for practitioners that show a genuine appreciation for the intelligence, expertise, and commitment of anyone willing to devote time to running interventions like these.

A few themes recur throughout the book. Every program is framed as an opportunity to build a fulfilling life, rather than to just say no to drugs. It is encouraging to see that the focus is on what to do rather than on what not to do. The parenting lessons repeatedly demonstrate the need for frequent, positive interactions that reward correct behaviors and let minor indiscretions slide. They reinforce the idea that parents are building a relationship with their children and adolescents, not just guiding their actions. The research on self-regulation employs well-known training in problem solving. The exercises emphasize social skills that have the potential to make participants develop an easier relationship with their peers—a few students could even find themselves becoming popular at school as a result. The program components that focus on academics are well individualized for each age group, and follow incremental steps in a way that will make the development of mastery an enjoyable experience, free of punishment. In essence, participants are trained to form great relationships with parents, teachers, and friends so they can succeed in many domains. The fact that they probably will never develop drug problems is only one of the many positive effects this work will create.

In summary, prevention researchers will find themselves generating new and interesting ideas with reading each chapter. Practitioners will find the described work encouraging, optimistic, and realistic. Furthermore, parents will likely find themselves tempted to take the book to local schools to start demanding comparable programs for their own children.

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