

Incorporate Life Skills into All Interventions Targeted to At-risk Youth

There is an increasing amount of evidence that incorporating a life skills component into at-risk youth interventions can make the program dramatically more effective and, as a result, greatly improve youth outcomes. The life skills approach seeks to help young people to develop the kind of skills that will incline them to engage in positive behavior, enable them to deal effectively with everyday life, and help them to make a healthy transition into adulthood. The ultimate goal of life skills development is to help at-risk youth to (re)connect with their communities, to continue their education, and to enter the economic mainstream, thereby preventing or reducing youth unemployment, underemployment, and early school leaving.

Although not uniformly defined, life skills (sometimes known as soft skills) fall into three basic categories: (i) social or interpersonal skills (communication, negotiation/refusal skills, assertiveness, cooperation, and empathy); (ii) cognitive skills (problem solving, understanding sequences, decision making, critical thinking, and self-evaluation); and (iii) emotional coping skills (managing stress, feelings, and moods).¹

Life skills training can be provided either as a program on its own or as a component of a program designed to achieve other youth development goals, such as job training or violence prevention. A formal life skills development curriculum can be taught through schools, job training institutions, or a “learning by doing” approach—for example, as part of community development projects or youth leadership training programs.² Providers of life skills training programs ideally should be capable of acting as facilitators; should respect young people; and should have warm, supportive, and enthusiastic personalities. To ensure that these programs are as effective as possible, they should apply life skills to issues that are relevant to the young person’s social circumstances and stage of development (for example, developing a sexual identity and how to deal with peer pressure).

How Do Life Skills Reduce Risky Youth Behavior?

Many at-risk youth—especially those who are neither in school or work—do not possess the necessary social and emotional skills and information to be integrated into society. Most children acquire these skills during childhood, but at-risk children often have not received the necessary information or had appropriate role models to be able to do so. It is the absence of these key life-coping skills that often leads young people to be socially excluded and to make them unemployable, and this, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will engage in risky behavior.

Life skills programs bridge this gap in two ways. First, they teach young people about social norms so that they are more attuned to the kind of social behavior that is expected of them when they participate in mainstream society. In the process, these programs teach young people the necessary social skills, including how to dress, how to manage anger, how to carry themselves, how to meet people, and other forms of social behavior, which are often taken for granted. Second, these programs teach young people the specific skills that are needed to be a responsible adult, including how to manage money, how to access social services, and about citizens’ rights.

Teaching young people life skills equips them with the knowledge and wisdom to make good decisions about their lives, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will engage in risky behavior. It also gives them confidence as well as the necessary knowledge to stay in school, find and keep a job, and find support in dealing with risky behavior or consequences that they may be facing. Life skills should also be taught in

schools to prepare young people who are in school for further education, future employment, and their citizenship, thereby decreasing the probability that they will engage in risky behavior.³ While teaching life skills widens the economic opportunities available to all young people, this is particularly the case for those who leave school early as they typically face more constraints than those who complete secondary education.

Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base

Evaluations of life skills programs from around the world have found that knowledge of life skills can be a protective factor during adolescence by delaying the onset of drug use, preventing risky sexual behavior, promoting anger management, improving academic performance, and enhancing social judgment.⁴ Researchers in the United States have found that young people who were given life skills training before the end of high school tend to be more productive and more connected to institutions (such as schools or places of employment) and make smoother transitions into a job or higher education compared with young people who left secondary school without these skills. The same research shows that young people with access to life skills training have a higher probability of having positive developmental outcomes as young adults, including finding and keeping a job.⁵ Although life skills training programs have become one of the most common interventions for at-risk youth around the world, they are also one of the least rigorously evaluated, particularly in developing countries. Also, because life skills training is often a component of broader youth interventions, it is difficult to isolate the specific effect of life skills training from the effects of the other components of those programs.⁶ Nevertheless, the evidence so far shows that life skills training has not only had a positive impact on the employability and educational outcomes of at-risk youth but has also reduced the likelihood that they will engage in violent behavior or substance abuse.

An evaluation of the U.S. *Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP)*, a multicomponent intervention program for disadvantaged teens that includes life skills training, tutoring, mentoring, community service, and financial incentives, showed that program beneficiaries were more likely than the control group to graduate from high school with a diploma (see table), had higher academic and functional skills and higher educational expectations, were more likely to attend post-secondary schools, and were likely to become teen parents less often.⁷

Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP): Short-Term Impact on High School Completion

Outcome	QOP-Group Mean (percentage)	Control-Group Mean (percentage)	Impact (percentage points)
Earned diploma	46	40	7*
Earned diploma or GED certificate	54	49	5
Earned diploma or GED certificate or attending high school	68	66	3
Earned diploma or GED certificate or attending high school or a GED class	79	72	7**

SOURCE: Telephone survey and transcripts.

NOTE: Each impact was derived by subtracting the control-group mean from the QOP-group mean prior to rounding those means; thus, an impact might not equal the difference between the rounded means that are displayed. The evaluation sample had 580 QOP enrollees and 489 controls.

* Estimate significantly different from zero at the 90% confidence level, two-tailed test

** Estimate significantly different from zero at the 95% confidence level, two-tailed test

*** Estimate significantly different from zero at the 99% confidence level, two-tailed test

Source: Maxfield, Schirm, and Rodriguez-Planas 2003.

A study of graduates of the U.S. program *YouthBuild*, which helps young people to develop life skills and employability skills, showed that participating in the program was highly correlated with positive employment and education outcomes and that program graduates were also much less likely to be involved in drug and alcohol abuse and criminal activities than they were before entering the program.⁸ The inclusion of life skills training is one of the distinguishing features of the *Jóvenes* job training programs that have been implemented

in several Latin America and Caribbean countries. Evidence from across these programs shows that participants' employment probability and earnings both increase as a result of their participation.⁹ While it is not possible to isolate the effect attributable to the life skills components of the *Jóvenes* programs, interviews with program participants in several countries indicate that they believe that the life skills component—which normally comprises about 20 percent of the total training time of the program—was a key factor in their post-program success, not only for their employment but for larger life issues as well.

Canada's *Employability Training Program*, which combined job training with life skills training, substantially increased the annual earnings of participants by increasing the number of hours during which they were employed. In the United Kingdom, young unemployed men who participate in the *New Deal for Young People* program, which combines job training with life skills training, are about 20 percent more likely to find jobs than their peers who do not participate.¹⁰ An evaluation carried out six years after the completion of the U.S. *Life Skills Training (LST)* program, which teaches general self-management skills, social skills, and information and skills specifically related to drug use, showed that participants had significantly lower tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use (50 to 75 percent); lower multiple drug use (up to 66 percent); lower pack-a-day smoking (by 25 percent); and less use of inhalants, narcotics, and hallucinogens than those in control groups.¹¹ Evaluations of the U.S. *PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)* program, which teaches skills such as self-control, positive peer relations, and interpersonal problem-solving skills, has been shown to improve outcomes for the young people in the program compared with those in a control group in the following areas: more self-control, greater understanding and recognition of emotions, increased ability to tolerate frustration, greater knowledge and use of effective conflict resolution strategies, improved thinking and planning skills, fewer anxiety/depressive symptoms, and fewer conduct problems.¹²

Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- ***Introduce life skills programming as early as possible***, ideally in early adolescence (12–14 years of age for girls and 13–15 years of age for boys).
- ***Build cooperation across sectors and programs***, particularly in health, employment, and violence prevention, and harmonize the contents of life skills modules across providers.
- ***Include young people in designing and implementing*** the program and its activities.
- ***Forge a partnership with the private sector*** for providing life skills training.
- Employ program ***staff who are skilled in group process and interactive teaching methods***, are ***respectful of adolescents***, and are perceived to be ***role models by adolescents*** (ideally the staff member should be the same person from the beginning to the end of the process).
- ***Introduce life skills in a formal manner within the regular school curriculum*** (ideally targeted in schools with greater numbers of disadvantaged youth) and link schools with NGOs in providing life skills training so that young people who are in school can learn life skills in a community setting and young people who are out of school can also benefit from curricula developed for schools.
- ***Teach life skills using positive reinforcement and hands-on pedagogy***, not a paternalistic approach.
- ***Provide ongoing training*** to participants, ideally for at least one year.

Endnotes

1. Pan American Health Organization. 2001. "Life Skills Approach to Child and Adolescent Human Development." Adolescent Health and Development Unit, Division of Health Promotion and Protection, Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C.
2. Hahn, A., T. Leavitt, and S. Lanspery. 2006. "Toward a Toolkit Brief: The Importance of Life Skills Training to Assist Vulnerable Groups of Youth in the Latin America and Caribbean Region." October.
3. Hahn, Leavitt, and Lanspery 2006.
4. Mangrulkar, L., C. Whitman, and M. Posner. 2001. "Life Skills Approach to Child and Adolescent Healthy Human Development." Adolescent Health and Development Unit, Division of Health Promotion and Protection, Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C. September.
5. Hahn, Leavitt, and Lanspery 2006.
6. Hahn, Leavitt, and Lanspery 2006.
7. Maxfield, M., A. Schirm, and N. Rodriguez-Planas. 2003. "The Quantum Opportunity Program Demonstration: Implementation and Short-Term Impacts." Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Princeton, NJ, August; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and Communities in Schools. 2007. "Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs, A Technical Report." 2007 National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University, Clemson SC, and Communities In Schools, Inc., Alexandria, VA.
8. Maxfield and others 2003; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and Communities in Schools 2007.
9. Betcherman, G., M. Godfrey, S. Puerto, and A. Stavreska. 2007. "Global Inventory of Interventions to Support Young Workers: Synthesis Report." World Bank, Washington, D.C.
10. Betcherman and others 2007
11. University of Colorado at Boulder, Blueprints for Violence Prevention: www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/programs/LST.html.
12. University of Colorado at Boulder, Blueprints for Violence Prevention: www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/programs/LST.html.

Key Implementation Considerations	
Anticipated Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased employability and academic performance • Greater social integration and improved social skills • Increased self-esteem and resilience • Improved behavioral and cognitive skills • Improved decision-making skills • Greater social and emotional competence, self-efficacy, and self-control • Increased confidence, character development, and moral reasoning • Increased pro-social behavior such as volunteering, civic engagement, and adopting democratic values
Secondary Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased educational attainment • Delayed onset of alcohol and substance use • Prevention of risky sexual behavior • Less likelihood of engaging in violent behavior
Responsible Agency/Actor	Ministries of Education, Labor, or Health; NGOs; private sector
Targeted Risk Group	Types I, II, and III
Target Age Group	12–24
Examples of Cost per Beneficiary	United States: Approximately US\$7 per student, per year (curriculum materials averaged over three-year period; this does not include cost of training or the staff providing the life skills training) ^a
Necessary Initial Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy to build support for life skills training in health and education sectors • Promotion of private sector involvement in life skills training • Marketing and dissemination of the life skills approach • Availability of trained professionals who can teach life skills • Existence of strong programs to which a life skills component can be added
Specific Examples & Levels of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence and Emerging Evidence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United States: <i>Life Skills Training</i>—Strong evidence (http://www.lifeskillstraining.com) • United States: <i>Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP)</i>—Strong evidence (http://www.oicofamerica.org/onlprog.html) • United States: <i>YouthBuild</i>—Strong evidence (http://www.youthbuild.org) • LAC: <i>Jóvenes</i> programs—Strong evidence • United States: <i>PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)</i>—Strong evidence (http://www.prevention.psu.edu/projects/PATHS.html/; www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs) • Canada: <i>Employability Training Program</i>—Emerging evidence • United Kingdom: <i>New Deal for Young People</i>—Emerging evidence
Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to find ways to evaluate the true impact of life skills programs to inform and improve design and implementation of future programs. • To have greatest impact on the lives of at-risk youth, life skills training should be accompanied by strategies aimed at improving the entire context in which a young person lives (poverty, education, employment). • Careful targeting is needed to ensure that those young people who are most at-risk are those who are benefitting from life skills programs. • The development of strong quality assurance mechanisms for service providers is advisable.

Source: a. University of Colorado at Boulder, Blueprints for Violence Prevention: www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/programs/LST.html.