**Introduction**

The *Second Step* program for Kindergarten through Grade 5 is a universal, classroom-based program designed to increase students’ school success and decrease problem behaviors by promoting social-emotional competence and self-regulation. It teaches skills that strengthen students’ ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. The program targets key risk and protective factors linked to a range of problem behaviors. Equipping students with *Second Step* skills creates a safer, more respectful learning environment that promotes school success for all.

**Social-Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation**

The *Second Step* program teaches students to have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. Students with these abilities are better able to participate in and benefit from classroom instruction (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O’Neil, 2001). They have more positive relationships with teachers and peers, thereby increasing their feelings of school connectedness (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Students who feel connected to school and to their peers are more likely to have positive academic self-concepts (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005) and less likely to be rejected, isolated, and bullied. They are more motivated for academic success and more engaged in learning (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Socially and emotionally competent students are also protected from health-compromising behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

**Self-Regulation and School Success**

To be successful in school, students must also be able to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tomainey, 2010; Thompson & Raikes, 2007). This ability to self-regulate facilitates constructive participation in learning activities and successful relations with peers and adults. Self-regulation skills support both academic achievement and the development of social-emotional competencies for elementary students (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003). Students’ ability to self-regulate can be influenced by teachers in the classroom. In every lesson from Kindergarten through Grade 3, the *Second Step* program includes five-minute games, known as Brain Builders, which work to build students’ attention, working memory, and inhibitory control. These skills, sometimes referred to as executive function skills, are important aspects of self-regulation that can positively influence students’ success in school (Blair, 2002; Blair & Razza, 2007). Building attention refers to students’ ability to direct, focus, and shift attention while screening out or ignoring distractions (Eisenberg, Guthrie, et al., 2000). Working memory involves students’ ability to remember and use information, such as a teacher’s directions or the directions for an activity (Baddeley, 2007). Inhibitory control helps students stop automatic but inappropriate responses or actions and remember appropriate behaviors, such as raising a hand before speaking (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Brain Builder games directly challenge and provide practice in these skills, which is integral to realizing the program’s overall goal of developing students’ self-regulation skills.

**Second Step Units**

**Skills for Learning**

The *Second Step* program further promotes the development of self-regulation skills and improved participation in learning through its focus on skills for learning. Focusing attention, listening, using self-talk, and being assertive are skills for learning introduced and practiced in a separate unit in Kindergarten through Grade 3 and integrated into the Grades 4 and 5 lessons across all units. Students must be able to integrate and apply these skills in order to be successful in diverse learning environments (Duncan et al., 2007; Howse, Lange, Farran, & Boyles, 2003; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). The skills for learning play a role in the development of social-emotional competence and are therefore woven into the program’s other units as well.

**Empathy**

The *Second Step* program helps students develop the ability to have empathy for others. This ability provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior and the development of skills for coping with peer challenges. Empathy is an important aspect of social-emotional competence and is related to academic success (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Students with high levels of empathy are skilled at identifying emotions in themselves and
others, labeling these emotions, and considering situations from others’ perspectives (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010). These students also tend to be less aggressive, better liked, and more socially skilled, and to have higher academic achievement than students with lower levels of empathy (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Izard et al., 2001). Being able to feel or understand what another person is feeling—the *Second Step* definition of empathy—prepares students to manage their own strong emotions and solve interpersonal problems.

**Emotion Management**
Teaching students to recognize strong emotions and use strategies to calm down has been shown to be effective in increasing their ability to cope and decreasing the likelihood of aggressive or other problem behaviors (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Mennin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). Effective emotion management is related to decreased levels of aggression and substance abuse and increased levels of social-emotional competence (Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005). The *Second Step* program teaches students proactive strategies that help prevent strong emotions from escalating into negative behaviors. These strategies, such as deep, centered breathing and positive self-talk, help students focus and calm themselves instead of acting on their first impulse. As a result, students are better able to use other skills, such as problem solving, to help them get along better with others and make good choices.

**Problem Solving**
Many different interpersonal problems can adversely affect children’s success in school (Duckworth, Tsukayama, & May, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). The *Second Step* program builds on students’ ability to handle peer conflicts effectively. Based on research on effective patterns of thinking, students are taught first to calm down, then to follow four Problem-Solving Steps: S: Say the problem, T: Think of solutions, E: Explore consequences, and P: Pick the best solution (Naglieri & Rojahn, 2004). Being able to engage effectively in social problem solving helps children choose prosocial solutions to their problems (Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006). Students who know how to respond to common problem situations help create a safer, more respectful school climate where more students can learn and succeed (Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

**Decreasing Problem Behaviors: Risk and Protective Factors**
The *Second Step* program helps prevent a range of problem behaviors by targeting the risk and protective factors that are best addressed in the classroom. Risk factors such as peer rejection, impulsiveness, and aggressive behavior put students at risk for involvement in harmful behaviors like delinquency and substance abuse (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004). Protective factors, including social-emotional competence, self-regulation skills, and school connectedness, prevent the onset—or buffer the risks—of problem behavior and promote school success (Hawkins et al., 2000).

**Conclusion**
The *Second Step* program teaches students the skills they need to be successful in school. With each unit, students build self-regulation and social-emotional skills that support their academic achievement and prevent them from engaging in harmful behaviors. Students improve their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. Socially and emotionally competent students feel more connected to school and to their peers, thus creating a healthy, safe, and respectful school climate for all (Durlak et al., 2011).
References


