Abstract

Early Risers is an evidence-based competence enhancement program (August, et al., 2007) which was adapted in the current study to include a component promoting positive peer relationships. The program offers skills training and support to children with adjustment difficulties and their parents. In the new peer component, well-adjusted children comprise half of the participants. Buddy-pairs, formed of one well-adjusted child and one child with difficulties, work and learn cooperatively throughout all skills training sessions. Lessons promote emotional intelligence and effective information exchange, with computer children serving as role models who create a group culture in which prosocial coping strategies are practiced and valued. The well-adjusted children are included not just to help train their less competent peers but also to learn ways to interact with them. In the study, 94 pre-kindergarten participants and 70 more were in a control group. Data from teacher questionnaires plus sociometric data from these children and 400 classmates are reported to document the effects of the program on social competence and peer acceptance. In the modified model of program effects, the program appears to improve social competence, which in turn leads to greater peer acceptance. There was an overall positive effect of the program on social competence one year after the program ended, but no overall program effect on peer acceptance.

Overview of Early Risers

- Designed for young children showing adjustment problems.
- Plus initial positive results in efficacy and effectiveness trials.
- Goals for the children: to build competence in:
  - Behavioral self-regulation
  - Social and emotional intelligence
- Goals for the parents: to build strength in:
  - Promoting positive child behavior
  - Emotional reactions in child
  - Involvement in school

Components of the program

Table: Skills training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills-training</th>
<th>Social &amp; emotional</th>
<th>Reading &amp; creative activities</th>
<th>Parent skills training</th>
<th>School support tailored to child/teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FOSTER curriculum</td>
<td>Summer (72 hours/year)</td>
<td>Parent skills training</td>
<td>Monitoring and Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(August, 1995)</td>
<td>After school (30 hours/year)</td>
<td>Manage behavior</td>
<td>Family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School support tailored to</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Response &amp; referrals based on need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>child/teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- A Family Advocate coordinates and provides direct service in both components
  - Bachelor’s or master’s level human service professional

New Peer Component

To address the need to promote positive peer relationships

1. Equal number of well-adjusted and poorly adjusted children recruited into program
2. Buddy System: during Summer and After-school programs
3. Peer Coping Skills (PCS) Training: during After-school programs (Blechman, et al., 1993)

- Focused on one-on-one communication skills

Goals for the Well-Adjusted Pairs

- Be role models of positive behavior and skills
- Contribute to a positive peer culture
- Include and accept at-risk peers based on current behavior, not on reputation
- Learn ways to diffuse or resolve conflicts
- Train in constructive ways to ant-social behavior
- Attempt to reconcile and repair damaged relationships
- Avoid retaliation
- Avoid adopting maladaptive behavior

Hypotheses

- Compared to controls, children in the program will end with:
  - Higher levels of social competence
  - Higher levels of peer acceptance
- Social competence at midpoint will mediate the program’s effects on peer acceptance at one-year follow-up.

Method

Participants

- From 5 schools in one mid-size Midwestern U.S. city
- 3 program schools and 2 assessment-only control schools
- Teachers nominated kindergarten and 1st grade children
- Children with adjustment problems (AP)
- Well-adjusted children (WA)
- Teachers complete BASC-2 (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004)
- All parameters based on need

Measures

- Social competence: BASC-2 Teacher Rating Scales
- Peer Preference Scores in children with AP

Results

Table 1. Multi-level model of social skills over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Multi-level model of peer preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- No significant difference between groups at final time and no significant slope differences

Results Summary & Discussion

- Program children increased in heightened social competence, relative to controls, by end of program

- Difference smaller but still significant one year later
- No difference between program and controls on peer acceptance over time

- Non-linear models need to be tested

- Indirect positive effect of program on peer acceptance through increased social competence
- Evidence for program effectiveness at increasing social competence of children with adjustment problems
- Increased social competence, in turn, led to greater peer acceptance

- Yet to explore: which classmates (those in program or not) are accepting those in program with adjustment problems

Acknowledgment

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