

First Step to Success: An Early Intervention for Children with Symptoms of AD/HD

By Mark Katz, PhD

RECENT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT FIRST STEP TO SUCCESS CAN HELP young school-aged children struggling with symptoms of AD/HD. Developed at the University of Oregon's Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior under the direction of Hill Walker, PhD, and Annemieke Golly, PhD, the program is recognized nationally as an effective early intervention for reducing aggression in children who exhibit such behaviors during their early school years.

Parents, educators, health care providers and well informed consumers are finding creative ways to address the needs and daily challenges of those who struggle with AD/HD. In each issue of Attention, we highlight one innovative program, model, or practice and pass on appropriate contacts so you can implement similar efforts in your community. Appearance in this column, however, does not imply endorsement by CHADD.

First Step to Success includes three interconnected modules: a universal screening procedure, a school-intervention component, and a parent/caregiver component. The program takes about two to three months from start to finish.

The school-intervention component—Contingencies for Learning Academic and Social Skills or CLASS—involves three successive phases: Coach, Teacher, and Maintenance. During phase one, a designated school-based resource person trained to imple-

ment the program (the coach) teaches two 20-30 minute prescriptively designed lessons daily, usually one in the morning and one in the afternoon. During phase two, the teacher assumes the responsibility for teaching the lessons under the supervision of the coach. During phase three, lessons are integrated into the school day's routine, and behavioral rewards are scaled back. Lessons are mastery based. Each day's behavioral objective must be met before moving ahead to a new objective.

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FOR MORE INFO

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The home component (called “homeBase”) consists of a series of weekly hour-long lessons, games, and activities conducted with the family in the family’s home. Parents are asked to practice the lessons for 10-15 minutes daily. Lessons target six areas related to school performance:

- communication and sharing in school;
- cooperation;
- limit setting;
- problem solving;
- friendship making; and
- development of confidence.

First Step built its reputation on its success in reversing the developmental trajectories of “early starters”—children in preschool through second grade whose aggressive and violent behaviors in the classroom, on the playground, and at home, are precursors to later and more serious aggressive and violent behavior patterns years down the road. Now researchers are finding that the program also helps young children who exhibit symptoms of AD/HD.

In a recently completed randomized control study involving 200 students within the school system in Albuquerque, New Mexico, results showed a significant reduction in AD/HD and disruptive behavior symptoms and significant improvement in social functioning for children who successfully completed the program.* Researchers also reported significant and moderate effects on measures of academic functioning. The study was the first randomized controlled trial of the First Step program restricted to a sample of students meeting criteria for AD/HD based on teacher rating scales. Researchers did, however, note the study’s limitations, among them the criteria used to establish AD/HD baseline symptoms. The participating children were not diagnosed based upon established DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. Also, while gains were significant, for some students post-intervention mean scores were on the high end of the normal range, suggesting improvement but not necessarily normalization. Also, significant gains were noted immediately after the intervention. Researchers are unaware of long-term effects.

Nonetheless, First Step appears to be a valuable tool for addressing the behavioral, emotional, and social needs of young children struggling with symptoms significant enough to meet AD/HD criteria based upon teacher ratings. Prevention specialists find that the First Step program can also be implemented in conjunction with other secondary and tertiary preventive interventions, an important consideration for schools using a Response to Intervention (RTI) paradigm to identify and effectively serve children at risk for more serious behavioral, social, and emotional problems down the road.

Oregon was the first state to recognize the benefits of making the program available to schools. In 1999 the state legislature allocated \$450,000 to cover the costs of rolling out First Step to any school district or individual school wishing to adopt it. Eleven of Oregon’s 36 counties implemented the program within the next eighteen months. Researchers found that many children com-

pleting the program achieved gains comparable to those found in well-controlled studies. Common barriers to effective implementation were also identified—not surprising perhaps, since schools typically lack the levels of funding, training, and technical oversight found under more controlled, idealized research conditions. Researchers are currently conducting a federally funded large-scale implementation of First Step in five sites across the United States (San Jose, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tampa and Oregon). Results will help prevention experts learn how to plan for and overcome common barriers to effective implementation.

Listed in several reviews of effective early intervention programs for preventing and reducing antisocial behavior and recognized as a model program by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), First Step to Success received CHADD’s 2002 Innovative Program of the Year Award.

Readers wishing to learn more are encouraged to go to firststeptosuccess.org, the program’s website, where one can download several research studies, presentation PowerPoint slides, and video clips demonstrating each of the program’s components. Hill Walker, PhD, can be reached through his email, hwalker@oregon.uoregon.edu. The program can be purchased through Sopris West Educational Services (sopriswest.com; 303- 651-2829 or 800-547-6747). ●

* Seeley, J.R., Small, J.W., Walker, H.M., Feil, E.G., Severson, H.H., Golly, A.M., & Forness, S.R. (2009). *Efficacy of the First Step to Success intervention for students with AD/HD*. *School Mental Health, 1* (1), 37-48.