

'Tools for getting along' curriculum helps schoolchildren solve social conflicts, study finds

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(Phys.org)—Two University of Florida special education researchers have found a method to help at-risk students with significant behavioral problems learn to calm aggressive tendencies and actively solve their social conflicts.

For the past 15 years, UF College of [Education researchers](#) Stephen Smith, the Irving and Rose Fien Endowed Professor, and associate scholar Ann Daunic have been developing a [curriculum](#) that would target these students' problem-solving skills. The curriculum, Tools for Getting Along, known as TFGA, gives upper elementary students processes for approaching social problems rationally.

"A lot of times when kids are having a social conflict with another person, it can be emotion-laden," Smith said. "Because of that, they can end up with an irrational approach to solving their problems, often through physical or [verbal aggression](#), or some other [inappropriate behavior](#) that doesn't really achieve what they want to achieve."

Daunic and Smith's latest evaluation of their problem-solving curriculum appeared in a spring issue of the *Journal of School Psychology*. Smith said the paper is the first to reveal the curriculum's effectiveness.

In the study, the curriculum was randomly assigned to about half of the 87 fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms observed in 14 schools in North

Central Florida with the other half receiving no intervention. Almost 1,300 students participated in the study.

Between 70 and 87 percent of the students in both groups studied received free and reduced price lunch, an attribute of socioeconomic status that can contribute to risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties. The researchers also considered gender and race, which can also be associated with this risk.

"While the target of Tools for Getting Along is children who have difficulties, it's also a preventive curriculum because it is implemented classwide with the idea that peers will help at-risk children see that there are other ways to solve problems that are more productive," Daunic said.

The curriculum contains instructional lessons, role-play scenarios, small-group activities and practice opportunities. Then, the effects of tool kit's 27 lessons were evaluated through teacher and student self-reports, observations and other measures.

Smith said the most significant findings of the recent study measuring TFGA's effects were the improvements in teacher ratings of students' "executive functions"—a psychological term describing a set of mental processes, including attention flexibility, working memory for temporarily storing and organizing information, and inhibitory control—that help us regulate our emotions and behaviors in new situations.

With better attention flexibility, students are able to shift their attention from being on the aggressive offense in a social conflict to thinking through alternative strategies. Improvement in working memory and inhibitory control enhances students' ability to stop and think before acting upon emotions.

"I think this shows a good example of what teachers can do for kids to allow them to equip themselves with a way to handle their own behavior," Smith said. "It's an opportunity for [students](#) to learn how to control behavior when teachers aren't there to manage it for them, like at recess, in the cafeteria, on the school bus and at home."

Daunic said that the study's results are particularly important in light of current research in neuropsychology and neuroscience that ties children's emotional well-being with their behavior in school and academic success.

"As more research comes out about the brain and how we learn, there's more support for interventions that help young people regulate their emotions and regulate their thought processes socially and academically," Daunic said. "What makes me feel good about this kind of work is that there's more and more evidence about its importance."

According to Daunic, positive effects of Tools for Getting Along have endured even a year after the study took place. The researchers are now writing a paper about the curriculum's longer-term effects and analyzing more data. Their findings will then be reviewed by national educational review panels, or clearinghouses, and considered for designation as a preferred, "evidence-based practice" in education.

The curriculum is available for purchase by teachers and schools at education.ufl.edu/conflict-resolution .

Provided by University of Florida

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