

Emotion Regulation, Coping, and Decision Making: Three Linked Skills for Preventing Problems in Adolescence

KEYWORDS

emotion regulation, coping, decision making, externalizing problems, adolescence, positive youth development, youth programs

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Many teenagers engage in externalizing behaviours or “acting out”. Examples of these behaviours include aggression, substance use, and delinquency.

Supported by relevant literature and examples of successful programs, the authors of this study propose that there are three interrelated core skills that underpin externalizing behaviours in adolescents:

- Emotion Regulation: the processes by which adolescents influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them.
- Coping: adolescents’ efforts to control their emotions, thoughts, physiology, and behaviours, in reaction to stressors and challenges.
- Decision making: the ability to make effective choices across varied situations and contexts, including stressful and challenging circumstances. This involves anticipating real-world scenarios, paying attention to relevant cues, and considering perspectives.

The information presented in this paper is useful for positive youth development researchers and youth programs aiming to reduce externalizing behaviours.

METHODOLOGY

The authors conducted a literature review to demonstrate that improving adolescent emotion regulation, coping, and decision making skills is the most promising way to prevent externalizing behaviours.

The authors also reviewed effective programs to serve as illustrative examples. The programs included in the review support youth from middle childhood until age 18, and are implemented within young people’s primary

developmental contexts (e.g. families, schools, communities).

KEY FINDINGS

- Emotion regulation, coping, and decision making are three core skills associated with externalizing problems and their precursors in adolescents. These skills are interrelated, so improving all three is critical.

- These three core skills can be fostered through interventions within families, schools, and communities. The authors provide an overview of effective strategies employed by several parent and family-based programs as well as school- and community-based programs.

- Improving the three core skills has a short-term, and sometimes a long-term, impact on the prevention of externalizing behaviours, though there are fewer studies conducted with adolescents.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This paper offers valuable insights for youth programs by highlighting key skills that can be developed in order to reduce externalizing behaviours. The paper also provides various examples of effective programs. Youth programs and researchers focused on positive youth development can benefit from the proposed future directions for research and practice.

Furthermore, the authors offer five observations regarding how youth programs can best integrate and promote emotion regulation, decision making, and coping:

1) Programs in elementary schools that link personal skill building with strategies that promote positive relationships with teachers and peers may be particularly effective as children's self-concepts about personal and social abilities crystallize during this period.

2) Direct interventions to foster the three skills during adolescence have the potential to be very beneficial for teens across all levels of risk.

3) Programs with the aim of stimulating strategic thinking might ideally take place in the context of novel or experimental learning modalities. For instance, youth programs that focus on sports or music and do not explicitly identify the three core skills they are trying to foster can also be effective.

4) Programs should teach youth how to acknowledge and manage their emotions, rather than avoid them. There is no consensus on the best strategies to help youth apply coping strategies,

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

Emotion regulation, coping, and decision making are core interrelated skills essential for reducing young people's externalizing behaviours.

select the best coping strategy, or how to be flexible in coping responses. This suggests a need for future research to apply and evaluate coping enhancement programs.

5) In addition to encouraging youth to appropriately channel their excitement seeking and withstand negative peer influence, programs focused on healthy decision making should include consideration of how acting out results from boredom, anger, unregulated emotions, and poor stress management.

“Young people who can effectively and flexibly recognize and regulate their emotions, who are able to process and respond to the personal and situational demands of adolescence effectively, and who are playful and strategic in their coping responses and in the way they make choices have a host of tools for dealing adaptively with stressors and challenges.”

(Modecki, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Guerra, 2017, p. 424).

RECAP

Improving young people's skills in emotion regulation, decision making, and coping is crucial for preventing and reducing externalizing behaviours. Programs that are well-designed and aligned with research findings can effectively improve these three capabilities in youth on a short-term and, occasionally, a long-term basis.

APA CITATION

Modecki, K. L., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., & Guerra, N. (2017). Emotion Regulation, Coping, and Decision Making: Three Linked Skills for Preventing Externalizing Problems in Adolescence. *Child Development, 88*(2), 417–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12734>

