



# Are Skills Taught in Prevention Programs Truly Effective: A Comparison of Adolescents' Versus Experts' Perceptions of Effectiveness

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## Overview

Teaching youth nonviolent skills for coping with problem situations is a major focus of many violence prevention programs. The development of such programs is often guided by assumptions about the skills adolescents need to succeed in their environment rather than by efforts to determine the relevance of specific skills for particular subgroups of youth and the factors that can hinder their use (Farrell & Camou, 2005). The success of these programs depends on the extent to which participants not only master the skills, but on the extent to which they actually use these skills and find them effective. Few program developers have tested these assumptions. An important influence on adolescents' use of specific coping skills is their perception of the effectiveness of the skills for addressing the problem (Farrell et al., 2008). Effectiveness is dependent on the individual's goals in the situation, and the nature of the response. Response effectiveness is ultimately determined by the outcomes the response produces.

This study conducted a focused analysis of data from a series of studies that examined response to peer conflict, and factors that influence the enactment of these responses within a predominately urban African American sample of adolescents. The first study involved qualitative interviews to identify responses to problems and effectiveness ratings of these responses by subgroups of youth and adults. In the second study, qualitative interviews were used to identify barriers and supports to making effective nonviolent and aggressive responses. Finally, in the third study, middle school youth completed a paper-and-pencil measure rating the effectiveness of different responses to problem situations.

Analyses compared the effectiveness ratings of the broader adolescent sample to those obtained by three groups of experts. The general sample rated the effectiveness of nonviolent responses significantly lower than each of the three expert groups. Many of these responses were typical of those often taught in prevention programs (e.g., talk it out). In contrast, adolescents in the general sample rated both physically and relationally aggressive responses as significantly more effective than adolescents and adults identified as "experts." Concerns about effectiveness of nonviolent responses were also represented by several themes that emerged during coding of qualitative interviews (Farrell, et al., 2008). These findings have important implications for prevention programs.

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## Method

### Study 1:

#### Participants

Participants were 122 urban middle school students.

#### Student Interviews

These youth were asked to generate responses to 25 problem situations that were identified as prevalent and difficult for this same population (Farrell et al., 2006). The effectiveness of these responses for the specific situations with which they were linked was then rated by three groups: a) 61 adolescents from schools and community centers who were nominated by adults as skilled at problem-solving; b) 27 teachers, community center staff, and family interventionists; and c) 9 researchers. This process identified responses to each situation that were considered effective by all three groups.

### Study 2:

#### Participants

Participants were 106 urban public middle school students (61% Female, and 97% African American).

#### Student Interviews

Participants were read descriptions of problem situation-response pairs during a semi-structured interview. The specific problem situations involved interpersonal problems in the peer and school context that had been identified previously. Responses had been identified in Study 1. Participants were asked to imagine that the situation was happening to them, and that they would enact the given response. They were then asked a series of questions about what factors in different domains (i.e., peer, family) would help or prevent them from making that response. These interviews were coded using qualitative software. Text was coded for a priori themes and for whether it was a barrier or support to aggressive or nonviolent behavior. Themes were then reviewed and revised as needed by a team of researchers.

### Study 3:

#### Participants

Participants were 183 middle school students from an urban public school system in the Southeastern United States (53% female and 90% African American).

#### Measure:

*Prosocial & Aggressive Responding.* A series of 22 problem situations paired with specific responses identified in Study 1 were presented to students. Students were asked to rate the effectiveness each response for each situation on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 = *Really Bad* to 5 = *Really Good*.

## Results

### Comparison of Effectiveness Ratings across Studies 1 & 3

A series of T-tests for pairs of means were conducted to compare perceptions of effectiveness of responses to peer conflict of a general sample of adolescents against three groups of "expert" raters. The general sample of adolescents' rated the effectiveness of nonviolent responses significantly lower than each of the three groups of experts at  $p < .01$ . In contrast, the general sample rated both non-physically and physically aggressive responses as significantly more effective than adolescents and adult "experts." This table summarizes the type of response and mean differences in effectiveness ratings across groups.

Responses	Mean for General Student Population	Mean for Student Experts	Mean for Community Adults	Mean for Researchers
Go to peer mediation	3.17	3.65	4.63	4.44
Talk it out	3.42	4.06	4.11	4.78
Talk to an adult	3.25	3.93	4.46	4.22
Not let it bother me.	3.11	4.00	3.89	4.22
Confront positively	3.25	4.10	4.19	4.78
Say "I'm not going to fight"	3.17	3.73	4.11	4.22
Apologize	3.42	4.39	4.63	5.00
Fight	2.13	1.10	1.15	1.00
Spread rumors about them	1.87	1.42	1.07	1.11
Tease them back	2.24	1.47	1.37	1.22
<b>Mean Response Ratings</b>				
Effective Nonviolent	3.25	4.01	4.31	4.56
Physically Aggressive	2.27	1.30	1.06	1.07
Non-physically Aggressive	2.20	1.37	1.17	1.14

### Qualitative Findings from Study 2

A final list of 41 themes emerged representing 7 domains of barriers and supports to effective nonviolent and aggressive responding. Domains represented Personal Resources, Beliefs, and Values; Consequences; Situational Characteristics; Family; Peer; School; and Neighborhood/Mesosystem. Two themes that emerged within the Consequences domain are relevant to the current project.

*Perceived Ineffectiveness of nonviolent response:* Belief that a nonviolent strategy will not solve the problem, either immediately or in the long run.

Ex.: One boy explains that he would not tell a teacher or principal if he was being teased and picked on by other students because:

"Maybe if you talk to an adult, the other students might get mad and want to fight you more."

*Perceived Ineffectiveness of fighting:* Belief that aggression will not solve the problem, either immediately or in the long run.

Ex.: One girl explains why she would not fight kids who were teasing her: "Its not worth it. Cuz you might not do nothing but be in that person's face again."

This table summarizes the number of students reporting each theme as a barrier or support to effective nonviolent and aggressive behavior.

Domain/Theme	Nonviolent Response	Fighting
<b>Consequences</b>		
Perceived ineffectiveness of nonviolent response	36	10
Perceived ineffectiveness of fighting	1	2

## Conclusions & Future Directions

•The beliefs or views that youth have about the effectiveness of nonviolent behavior and aggression significantly influence their implementation of these behaviors

•It is notable that responses to peer conflict judged to be effective by "experts," particularly adult experts, are not viewed in the same way by the general population of urban adolescents

•The normative climate among students in these urban schools reflects a belief that aggression is an effective way to solve problems

•Implications for prevention program curriculum developers:

•Although youth may learn the skills taught in prevention programs, they may be reluctant to use them because of concerns that they will not be effective, or in some cases, may even make the situation worse

•Developers need to address youth's attitudes toward responding nonviolently to conflict and norms for this type of behavior in prevention curriculum.

•Prevention efforts focused on individual students may require parallel efforts that support the effectiveness of the responses they teach.

•Further work is needed to establish the actual effectiveness of different skills taught in prevention programs within a particular context

•Further work should also focus on barriers to the use of "effective" nonviolent responses in different contexts.