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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet briefly reports on an experimental program designed to help the underachieving student whose academic and behavioral problems keep him in trouble with school officials. The project is based on the following premises: (1) children who learn basic academic skills and appropriate behaviors will be less vulnerable to future problems; (2) some children are not motivated by the usual rewards found in the school system; and (3) these children can be motivated through utilization of appropriate reinforcement procedures. The program involves three elements: (1) math and English work units which meet individual student needs, (2) group interpersonal skills classes, and (3) a counseling program for the parents. Results indicate that this investment in money, time, and concern for children has brought short-term rewards for students in terms of higher grades, better test results in English, and improved relations with teachers, parents, and friends. Long-range effects on the lives of the students cannot be measured; however, the author feels that it is fairly safe to assume that the replacement of failure with successful learning experiences will have useful and rewarding ramifications for the child and society. (Author/PC)

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# Helping Schools Help Children

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**Research Report - 2**

NATIONAL INSTITUTE  
OF MENTAL HEALTH

CG 009 217



# **the concept**

An experimental program, designed to help the under-achieving student whose academic and behavioral problems keep him in trouble with school officials, is being tested in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C.

The project is based on the following premises: 1) children who learn basic academic skills and appropriate behavior will be less vulnerable to serious problems in the future; 2) some children *are not motivated* to learn these skills *by the usual rewards* found within the school system and are, therefore, more apt to have future problems; 3) these children *can be motivated* to improve their behavior and academic skills *through the utilization of appropriate reinforcement procedures*, and thus can be helped to avoid future problems.

# **background**

Between 1968 and 1971, a work-study program based on a token-economy system was developed at the Institute for Behavioral Research in Silver Spring, Maryland. Participating junior high school students, who were transported to the IBR facility from schools in the District of Columbia and Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties, earned or lost points depending on how well they improved their behavioral and academic skills. The students used their points to buy desired privileges. This project, referred to as PICA\*, served as a laboratory model for the program which is now installed in the junior high school. The new program serves students having less pronounced problems than those encountered in PICA.

In 1971, at the invitation of the principal, IBR researchers and staff set up their remedial education program within the school facility. They trained teacher volunteers from the math and

\* Programming Interpersonal Curricula for Adolescents

English Departments of the junior high school in the use of behavior management techniques and learning materials which had been developed in the PICA program. After relocating the program in the school facility, the project was renamed PREP\*.

# **the program**

The PREP program involves three elements: 1) math and English work units which are programmed to meet the individual needs of the students; 2) group interpersonal skills classes where students learn to develop the behavioral skills needed to succeed in school, at home, and in the community; and 3) a counseling program for the parents.

The approximately 80 PREP students are divided into 5 groups of 16 each. In order to test the effectiveness of the program and its various components, one group receives all components of the program and the others receive just one.

A PREP student who is involved in the full program spends approximately 3 hours of the school day in PREP-related activities and attends regular classes during the rest of the school day. Upon arriving at the PREP Skills Center, he punches a time clock and hands in his Student Activity Report, a form on which his regular class teachers have indicated his behavior and work level in their classes. Based on this information he will either receive or lose points, and thus be encouraged to improve his behavior and academic performance in his regular classes.

## **1) *Math and English***

After checking in, a PREP student, with the assistance of a staff member, picks either a math or English activity and goes to work at his own desk. All PREP students have been pretested and must complete study programs on the level of work which is suitable to meet their individual needs. Their work is monitored to assure that they balance their time properly between developing both English and math skills.

\* Preparation Through Responsive Educational Programs

When a student completes a work unit, he brings it to the checking station. If he scores 100%, he will take a test covering the completed material. He must score at 90% or better on this test in order to go on to the next level of work. If he does not meet this level, he will be given an alternate work unit to cover the same material. A PREP student who has difficulty in successfully completing a unit receives individual help from a staff member.

PREP students receive points for completed work units and for productive, cooperative behavior. They lose points for inappropriate behavior such as sleeping, damaging equipment, or missing other classes. The students use their points to purchase various rewards such as "time-out" in a nearby lounge, time to play a bowling game or toward becoming a teacher's aide. Playing the role of teacher's aide has proven very popular with the students and, therefore, is one of the most successful reinforcers available.

## **2) *Interpersonal Skills Classes***

Students also receive and lose points for their participation and behavior during their interpersonal skills classes. These classes are designed to encourage behavior useful to students in school, home, and in the community. For example, there is a "how-to" program where they learn necessary study skills such as note-taking, listening and speaking in large groups, and how to make use of library materials.

Another feature is the TARR program (Teenagers' Rights and Responsibilities), which students consider to be one of the most useful curricular components. TARR provides them with factual information about the legal processes and teaches them effective and socially acceptable methods for handling problems relating to the law.

An innovative teaching unit involves having the students learn the fundamentals of operant conditioning in order to enable them to control and change their own behavior. They are then encouraged to analyze their behavior in various situations, determine whether a change is desired, and decide how to bring about the desired changes.

Other curricula involved in the interpersonal skills classes include the use of various forms of media and role playing to help students identify their problems and develop problem-

solving behavior. Problems which are frequently dealt with relate to adolescent development, use of drugs, and family relationships.

### **3) Parents' Program**

To help children in PREP sustain their new behaviors, the understanding and support of their parents are sought. To this end, a program has been structured to facilitate parent participation. A vital part of this program is a weekly newsletter sent to all parents throughout the year informing them of project activities and student achievement. The Parents' Newsletter increases communication between the home and the school and enables parents and PREP staff to provide more effective guidance to the children.

Each week throughout the first semester, parents are invited to participate in classes on child management. They are encouraged to read selected materials which focus on methods for improving communication with their children and on more effective ways of handling child-related problems. Guest lecturers speak to the parents about the main points made in the reading materials and then discuss these points with the parents, encouraging them to relate the material to their specific needs and problems.

During the second semester, the focus is on consultation with individual parents and includes a home observation program established at the request of the parents. Staff members are invited to observe parent-child interactions in the home and to provide assistance in improving family relationships.

## **results**

The PREP program has brought modern technological techniques into a school facility in order to help that school help its students. Computerized data, learning machines, and televised classes are all used by PREP. This investment in money, time, and concern for children has brought a short-term reward for students in terms of higher grades in all classes, better test

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results in English and math, and improved relations with teachers, parents, and their friends.

The long-range effect that this experience of success will have on the lives of these children cannot be measured as yet, but it is fairly safe to assume that the replacement of failure with a successful learning experience will have useful and rewarding ramifications for the child in particular and for society in general.

Various studies indicate that young people who experience problems and failure in school, who have difficulties in relating with parents, and who also have problems functioning in the community, are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system. The Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency of the NIMH is supporting the PREP program in the interest of developing preventive measures which can help children to develop effective academic, social and interpersonal skills, and thus to avoid serious future problems. In no way does this research support imply that students involved in this program are labeled or even considered to be pre-delinquent.

For further information regarding the PREP program, contact:

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The Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency of the National Institute of Mental Health is interested in making available information gained from its research programs.

*Research Reports II* is the second in a series of fliers designed to disseminate information to researchers, program administrators, and others who are involved in the fields of crime and delinquency and mental health.

The *Reports* provide brief descriptions of research projects supported by the Center and include the names and addresses of the researchers to help expedite the flow of information between researchers and researchers.

## **Research Report - 2**

**CENTER FOR STUDIES OF CRIME AND DELINQUENCY**  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

