

# Adapting First Step to Success to Address Challenging Behaviors in Head Start Classrooms: Preliminary Findings from the Preschool First Step Efficacy Trial

Jason Small<sup>1</sup>, Edward Feil<sup>1</sup>, Hill Walker<sup>1,2</sup>, Andy Frey<sup>3</sup>, John Seeley<sup>1</sup>, & Amy Lingo<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Oregon Research Institute, <sup>2</sup>University of Oregon, <sup>3</sup>University of Louisville

## Introduction

Kindergarten school readiness requires student adjustment to teacher- and peer-related expectations. Teacher-related adjustments mediate a student's academic development and achievement; peer-related adjustments govern peer relations and social development (Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992). Promotion of academic enablers (DiPerna & Elliott, 2002), skills such as cooperating, sharing, listening to others, and focusing attention, is fundamental to the development of social competence and effective learning (Gresham, Cook, Crew & Kern, 2004) and increases the likelihood that a child will effectively participate in and benefit from instruction.



**First Step to Success** is an evidence-based, manualized, collaborative early intervention consisting of three modular components: universal screening, a classroom intervention, and parent training. The program forges a partnership between the home and school with the child's teacher(s), parent(s), and behavioral coach working together to teach school success skills and a pro-social behavior pattern that fosters friendship making. Primary adaptations to a preschool setting included the addition of teacher training in primary prevention strategies and intensified coach support.

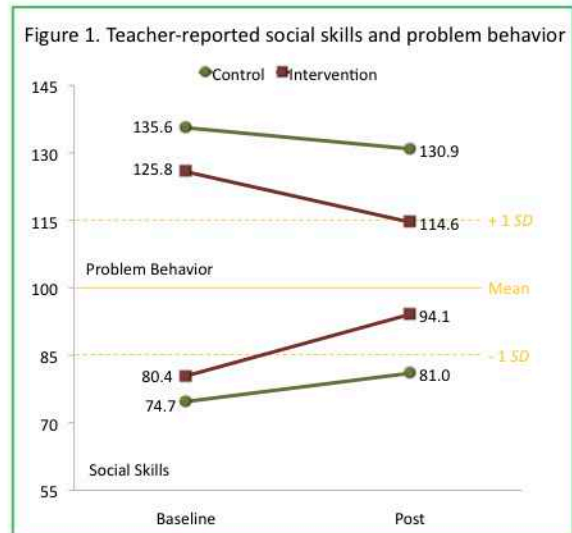
Table 1. Baseline demographics by condition.

Measure	Comparison (n=19)	Intervention (n=20)	Test statistic
Age <i>M(SD)</i>	4.1 (0.2)	4.0 (0.5)	0.46
Female <i>n(%)</i>	8 (42.1)	4 (19.0)	2.53
African American <i>n(%)</i>	10 (52.6)	8 (38.1)	0.85
Caucasian <i>n(%)</i>	6 (31.6)	8 (38.8)	0.19
ESP 1 <sup>st</sup> ranked <i>n(%)</i>	15 (78.9)	13 (61.9)	1.38
At risk on ABI <i>n(%)</i>	18 (94.7)	21 (100.0)	1.13
At risk on MBI <i>n(%)</i>	19 (100.0)	20 (95.2)	0.93
At risk on ABS <i>n(%)</i>	19 (100.0)	18 (85.7)	2.93

ESP = Early Screening Project; ABI = Adaptive Behavior Index; MBI = Maladaptive Behavior Index; ABS = Aggressive Behavior Scale. At risk = 1 SD or more from the mean.

## Method

Data are from the first cohort of a multi-site, randomized controlled efficacy trial of the early childhood version of First Step to Success. In fall 2009, thirty-nine teachers from Kentucky (n=23) and Oregon (n=16) completed the Early Screening Project screening protocol (ESP; Walker, Sevenson, & Feil, 1995). Research staff recruited one nominated student from each classroom. After obtaining parent consent and completing baseline data collection, we randomized participants to an intervention or control condition. Control teachers received training in primary prevention strategies. Intervention teachers received the same training in primary prevention strategies as well as training in First Step to Success and assistance implementing the program from a behavioral coach.



**Measures.** We collected baseline and post-intervention parent- and teacher-reported social skills and problem behavior data from the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008).

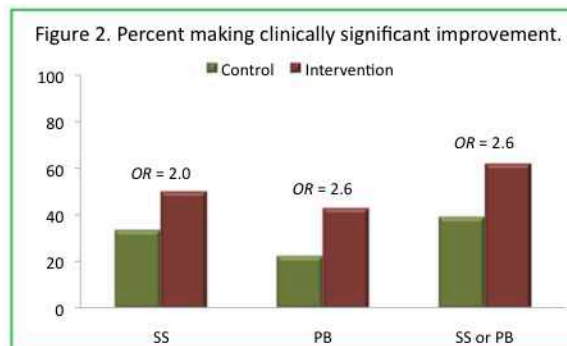
## Results

Based on teacher-report (see Figure 1), children in the intervention condition had greater increases in social skills ( $d = 1.04$ ) and decreases in problem behavior ( $d = -.68$ ) than children in the control condition. Parents reported greater gains in social skills ( $d = .84$ ) and reductions in problem behavior ( $d = -.68$ ) as well. As a measure of program responsiveness, we calculated a Reliable Change Index (RCI; Jacobson & Truax, 1991). Students in First Step were more than twice as likely to improve on at least one teacher-reported measure (see Figure 2).



## Discussion

Preliminary findings support use of the preschool adaptation of First Step with children exhibiting challenging behaviors. Students participating in First Step to Success demonstrated clinically reliable improvement in behaviors important to school readiness and the necessary adjustment to teacher- and peer-related expectations.



OR = odds ratio; medium effect = 2.48.