KISSCE - ENGAGEMENT

Evidence in Action

A K20 Center Research Brief

SPARK Teen Mentoring Program: A Resilience-Focused Student Development Program for High School Youth

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Introduction

Many adolescents face challenges that can undermine academic success and healthy development, including poverty, violence, substance abuse, discrimination, family conflict, and limited educational opportunities. These risk factors can contribute to poor outcomes such as school dropout, delinquency, substance use, and emotional difficulties. At the same time, research shows that some young people demonstrate resilience and achieve positive outcomes despite adversity.

Resilience research suggests that protective factors such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, problem-solving abilities, positive relationships, and supportive environments can help youth successfully navigate challenges. School-based mentoring programs have emerged as a promising strategy for strengthening these protective factors because schools provide consistent opportunities to build social, emotional, and academic competencies.

The SPARK Teen Mentoring Program (Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid) was developed as a resilience-focused intervention designed to strengthen emotional well-being, build interpersonal skills, increase resilience, and support school success. Prior to this study, the program had not been systematically evaluated. The purpose of the study was to determine whether participation in SPARK improved students' knowledge of the principles of mind, thought, and consciousness; communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; emotional regulation; and resilience.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with pre-intervention and post-intervention measurements. Students were assigned to intervention or comparison conditions through classroom-level random assignment within participating schools. Students in the intervention group received the SPARK Teen Mentoring Program, while students in the comparison group continued with their regular school curriculum. The period between pre- and post-assessment was approximately 13 weeks.

Sample

Number of Participants

- 396 students initially agreed to participate.
- 372 students completed both pre- and post-intervention assessments and were included in the final analysis.

Grade Levels

- Students were enrolled in Grades 9 through 12.

Student Characteristics

- Average age: 15.7 years
- 52% female
- 51% identified as Hispanic
- 90.6% received free or reduced-price lunch

Setting

The study was conducted in four urban public high schools in the southeastern United States:

- Two Title I comprehensive high schools
- Two alternative high schools serving students who had fallen behind academically or experienced difficulty succeeding in traditional settings

Intervention Description

SPARK Teen Mentoring Program

The SPARK Teen Mentoring Program (Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid) is a resilience-focused, school-based program designed to reduce risk factors, uncover innate resilience, promote emotional well-being, and facilitate school success.

What Students Did

Students participated in structured curriculum lessons and activities focused on understanding the following concepts:

- Mind
- Thought
- Consciousness
- Personal goal setting
- Decision making
- Habits and habitual thinking
- Reasoning

- Mood and mood changes
- Fear and insecurity
- Self-esteem
- Acceptance of differences in individual thinking

Lessons included activities intended to increase the following behaviors:

- Emotional regulation
- Resilience
- Communication skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Decision-making skills

Academic and Developmental Focus
The program focused on the following skills:

- Non-cognitive skills for the future
- Emotional well-being
- Resilience development
- Communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Emotional regulation
- Positive youth development

How the Intervention Was Delivered
The intervention was delivered using the following strategies:

- Used a traditional curriculum
- Delivered in a group format
- Included age-appropriate lessons
- Incorporated group discussions, role playing, videos, demonstrations, and other learning activities
- Emphasized both development and generalization of personal and social skills

Implementation of the Intervention Delivered
The intervention was delivered by trained SPARK facilitators, who demonstrated the following skills:

- Prior classroom experience
- Had previously delivered the SPARK intervention
- Completed 20 hours of training in the intervention model and study procedures

Dosage

The article provides sufficient information to calculate intervention dosage.

Stated Dosage

The SPARK Teen Mentoring Program consisted of the following:

- **13 consecutive weekly sessions**
- **1 hour per session**
- Delivered over **13 weeks**

Total Number of Sessions

- 13 instructional sessions

Approximate Total Instructional Time

- 13 sessions × 60 minutes = **780 total instructional minutes**
- Equivalent to approximately **13 instructional hours**

Actual Attendance

Researchers monitored attendance and curriculum exposure and determined that students attended an average of **11.48 of the 13 sessions.**

Average Delivered Dosage

- 11.48 sessions × 60 minutes
- Approximately **689 instructional minutes**
- Approximately **11.5 instructional hours** received on the average

Dosage Summary

Dosage Element	Amount
Planned Sessions	13
Session Length	60 minutes
Program Duration	13 weeks
Total Planned Time	780 minutes (13 hours)
Average Sessions Attended	11.48
Average Time Received	~689 minutes (11.5 hours)

Data Analysis

Researchers first examined whether the intervention and comparison groups were similar before the program began. They then compared changes from pre-test to post-test for students who participated in SPARK and those who did not.

Analyses focused on changes in the following behaviors:

- Knowledge of mind, thought, and consciousness
- Communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Emotional regulation
- Resilience

Repeated-measures analyses determined whether students who received SPARK improved more than students in the comparison condition.

Results

Knowledge of Mind, Thought, and Consciousness

Students who participated in SPARK significantly increased their understanding of the principles of mind, thought, and consciousness. Students in the comparison group showed virtually no improvement.

Communication, Decision-Making, and Problem-Solving Skills

Students who participated in SPARK improved the following skills:

- Communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Problem-solving skills

In contrast, students in the comparison group experienced declines in these skills during the study period.

Emotional Regulation

Students who participated in SPARK reported fewer difficulties regulating emotions by the end of the program. Improvements were observed in emotional clarity and impulse control.

Students in the comparison group showed small increases in managing emotional difficulties over time.

Resilience

Students who participated in SPARK demonstrated increases in the following indicators:

- Overall resilience
- Sense of relatedness
- Sense of mastery
- Optimism

Students who did not receive SPARK experienced declines across these resilience indicators.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that a relatively brief, structured program can strengthen skills that support both academic and personal success. Improvements in emotional regulation, decision making, communication, and resilience indicate that students may be better equipped to manage challenges, build relationships, and engage successfully in school.

Application into Practice

Schools and districts seeking to strengthen resilience and social-emotional competencies among high school students may use SPARK as a structured approach implemented throughout the school day.

Action Steps for Implementation

- Implement a hands-on resilience-focused curriculum.
- Schedule one 60-minute session per week for 13 consecutive weeks.
- Deliver instruction in group settings.

- Include interactive learning activities such as discussions, role plays, demonstrations, and videos.
- Focus instruction on the following outcomes:
    - Goal setting
    - Decision making
    - Emotional regulation
    - Self-esteem
    - Problem solving
    - Resilience
    - Understanding thinking processes.
- Provide facilitator training before implementation. The study used facilitators who had completed 20 hours of training.
- Monitor implementation fidelity using structured observation and self-monitoring procedures.
- Track attendance and provide make-up instruction when students miss sessions.

Staffing Considerations

- Trained facilitators are required.
- Facilitators should have classroom experience.
- Training and fidelity monitoring appear to be core implementation components.

Time Commitment

- 13 total sessions
- Approximately 13 instructional hours
- Average participant exposure in the study was approximately 11.5 hours

Contextual Considerations

The program was implemented in both Title I and alternative high school settings serving largely economically disadvantaged students. Schools considering replication should note that positive outcomes were achieved in these contexts and under conditions of high implementation fidelity.

APA Citation

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