



## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

# Second Step® Middle School

## Introduction

The primary goal of Second Step® Middle School is to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and mindsets that will help them successfully navigate adolescence. During adolescence, individuals experience great changes in their brain, body, and environment. These changes come with challenges as well as opportunities. A central task for adolescents is to understand who they are and develop a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). In addition, adolescents need to learn skills, knowledge, and mindsets that will help them grow into competent individuals and members of society. Research in developmental neuroscience shows that while the brain network in charge of emotional development abruptly becomes more assertive during adolescence, the brain network in charge of reasoning and cognitive control matures at a slower pace (Steinberg, 2007). This sometimes-volatile combination contributes to social-emotional distress (Rapee et al., 2019), interpersonal conflicts (Collins & Steinberg, 2006), and risk-taking (Steinberg, 2004).

Second Step® Middle School helps students acquire the skills, knowledge, and mindsets they need to develop a positive sense of self, handle strong emotions, and take on a growth mindset (the belief that abilities or characteristics are malleable and can change over time). In addition, the program helps students better understand and connect with their peers and avoid and resolve conflicts. Together, these skills and mindsets contribute to positive classroom and school climates that serve as the foundation for academic and social success.

## Social Connectedness

Second Step® Middle School aims to strengthen social connectedness through social belonging lessons at the start of middle school (in Grade 6 or 7) and then again

in Grade 8 to help prepare students for the transition to high school. Feeling a sense of social connectedness is a fundamental human need and an important contributor to students' school success (Walton et al., 2012). Having a greater feeling of social connectedness increases academic achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2011), and when social connectedness is threatened, students can suffer academically (Baumeister et al., 2002). It's important to support students' sense of belonging at school, especially when they encounter common social difficulties in a new school environment (Walton & Cohen, 2011). The social belonging lessons normalize common social difficulties by helping students understand that social challenges when entering a new school are temporary and usually get better, in part through help and support from other students and staff (Walton et al., 2012).

## Growth Mindset

A mindset is a person's beliefs about whether their abilities or characteristics are fixed, set, and unchangeable (fixed mindset), or malleable and capable of changing over time depending on circumstances and effort (growth mindset; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). A growth mindset has been shown to create an internal "psychological world" that promotes resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Second Step® Middle School targets growth mindset in two areas: intelligence (or the ability to do well in school) and personality.

When students believe their intelligence and ability to do well in school are malleable and can grow and change based on experience and effort, their school-related behavior improves (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Specifically, having a growth mindset about intelligence can improve students' academic goals (they believe they can learn instead of thinking they're unintelligent), attitudes toward effort in school (they believe trying hard creates success instead of

believing they're incapable), and responses to setbacks and difficulties (they try new strategies and work harder instead of giving up) (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

When students have fixed mindsets about personality, they believe who people are and how they act is set and doesn't change (Miu & Yeager, 2015). Such fixed mindsets about personality have negative implications for both individuals and their social interactions with others. Specifically, having a fixed mindset about personality predicted greater negative emotionality (negative self-feelings, stress, and anxiety) after an experience of peer exclusion (Yeager et al., 2014). Students with a fixed mindset about personality are also more likely to believe that when others hurt or offend them, they do it on purpose. Believing others' personalities are fixed can increase students' desire for revenge in conflict situations (Yeager et al., 2011). In contrast, having growth mindsets about their own personalities and the personalities of others has been shown to reduce depression and improve how students respond to social exclusion and peer hostility (Miu & Yeager, 2015).

## Goal-Setting and Implementation Intentions

Setting goals is important, but those goals need to be specific and actionable. Having specific and actionable implementation intentions helps people accomplish goals (Gallo & Gollwitzer, 2007). In Second Step® Middle School, students are taught to form implementation intentions by creating If-Then Plans, in which the "If" is a specific cue they expect to encounter and the "Then" is the action they want to carry out. Setting an implementation intention helps students be specific about what they want to do. It also helps them carry out that action by linking it to a specific cue—something concrete that can prompt them to act. Implementation intentions facilitate goal achievement beyond goal-setting by itself (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Implementation intentions make it easier for students to follow through on a plan (Bargh et al., 2010). They're powerful in part because they help students make positive actions more automatic, reducing the need for willpower and self-control (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Using the If-Then Plan, students can think about challenging situations they're likely to encounter and make a thoughtful plan ahead of time

about how to respond. Setting the implementation intention creates a mental association between the cue (the "If" situation they might encounter) and the action (the "Then" action they'll take in response). As a result, the cue serves as a prompt for the student to carry out the planned action. This process makes doing the action more like a habit than a conscious effort.

Implementation intentions are fairly simple, and they have been shown to be just as effective with difficult goals as with easy goals (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). In addition, implementation intentions are especially effective for students with self-regulation challenges (Bargh et al., 2010). Across multiple Second Step® Middle School lessons, students are prompted to form implementation intentions to help them carry out plans and accomplish goals they develop for themselves. Self-generated plans are important because implementation intentions are more effective for intrinsically motivated goals than extrinsically motivated goals (Gawrilow & Gollwitzer, 2008).

Goal-setting and growth mindset are complementary approaches to helping students identify interests and areas for personal growth, as well as develop strong work habits. Specifically, when students set goals focused on developing competence, known as mastery goals, they demonstrate greater motivation and effort, adaptive learning strategies, and better learning outcomes (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016; Senko, 2016). These concepts are addressed across all grades in the program.

## Developing a Positive Sense of Self

A major challenge adolescents face is to figure out who they are and develop a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Second Step® Middle School includes lessons that help students reflect on their guiding principles, explore different aspects of self-concept, and practice strategies to build confidence and sense of agency.

Guiding principles are values and beliefs important to individuals in life (Schwartz, 2012). They guide a person's thoughts, actions, and decisions and help define "who you are." A person can have multiple guiding principles that they deem critical, and a particular principle may be important to one person but unimportant to another person (Schwartz, 2012). In addition, a person's guiding principles can change

over time. Research shows that guiding principles and their associated behaviors change during adolescence (Benish-Weisman, 2015; Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2018). For example, during adolescence, individuals put increased importance on self-focused values, such as power or being in charge, and decreased importance on values focused on others, such as tradition (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2018). While figuring out their guiding principles, students may experience both positive and negative feelings. Spending time focusing on their guiding principles can help students lower their stress and avoid stereotyping their peers (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), as well as support their ability to manage their emotions (Tamir & Mauss, 2011). There's also evidence that providing opportunities for students to reflect on sources of self-worth or connect their personal values to academic tasks can increase motivation, engagement, and achievement (Bowen et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2009; Harackiewicz & Prinski, 2018). Second Step® Middle School lessons help students reflect on their guiding principles, recognize that diverse guiding principles exist among their peers, and practice decision-making that aligns with their guiding principles.

Self-concept is a person's perception of who they are. Students form these perceptions through their experiences with their environments and are influenced by people who are important to them (Shavelson et al., 1976). A self-concept is multifaceted and hierarchical—a person has a general self-concept, as well as different facets of self-concept, including academic self-concept, social self-concept, emotional self-concept, physical self-concept, and other aspects (Shavelson et al., 1976). Throughout adolescence, individuals' perceptions of themselves change greatly. For example, research shows that students experience a decrease in their academic self-concepts from elementary to middle school (Esnaola et al., 2018). In addition, peers and social media play an increasingly important role in students' self-perceptions in middle school, as adolescents tend to compare themselves with peers and people they see on social media when thinking about themselves (Sebastian et al., 2008). Second Step® Middle School lessons provide an opportunity for students to think about different aspects of their self-concept, recognize their strengths, and identify areas for growth and development. In addition, students will reflect on the different factors that

have influenced the formation of self-concept. Lessons also normalize the changes in self-concept during adolescence and let students know it's okay if they're still figuring out who they are. Instead of pushing for an easy answer to "who you are," lessons focus on the exploration process, which is a critical part of identity development. As research shows that an individual's vision of their future self can motivate them to work toward realizing that vision (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018), lessons also encourage students to think about their self-concept in the near future and create a specific action plan to work towards their future self-concept.

Agency can be defined as the capacity to initiate purposeful action with will, autonomy, freedom, and choice (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Self-efficacy—translated to "confidence" in the lessons—is an individual's perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels (Bandura, 1997). These concepts can apply to objectives ranging from simple homework assignments to long-term goals (Bandura, 2006; Schunk & Meece, 2005). Research shows that students place significant value on having agency over various aspects of their school and social experiences (Akos, 2004). Research also shows that self-efficacy is a major factor in academic success. For example, self-efficacy is associated with greater persistence (Caprara et al., 2008), intrinsic interest/motivation in academic learning (McGeown et al., 2014), and efficient problem-solving, among numerous other positive outcomes (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). According to Bandura (1986, 1997), there are four sources of self-efficacy, including an individual's previous attainments (mastery experience), their observation of others' success, verbal and social persuasions from others (encouragement), as well as their emotional and physiological states. Lessons focus on building a sense of agency and self-efficacy for adolescents, covering all four sources of self-efficacy and introducing practical strategies students can use to build their confidence.

## Emotion Management

Youth who have difficulties managing their emotions are more likely to exhibit internalizing and externalizing behaviors and have substance abuse (Brady et al., 2010; Hessler & Katz, 2009; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003; Vitaro et al., 1998; Wills et al., 2006). Emotional awareness and management, in contrast, contributes to positive

youth development, helps students cope with problems in more effective ways (Zalewski, et al., 2011), improves social competence, and decreases both internalizing and externalizing problems (Trentacosta & Fine, 2010). Second Step® Middle School teaches students in all grades to notice their emotions, reflect on the actions their emotions influence, and learn strategies to manage their emotions.

Children and adolescents can learn a variety of strategies to manage and cope with stressful situations (Metz et al., 2013; Wyman et al., 2010) including learning techniques to distract themselves, relax, or deliberately alter their thoughts and practice positive self-talk in an emotional situation. Teaching students to recognize strong feelings and use positive strategies to stay in control are effective ways to increase coping and reduce problem behaviors and psychopathology in both the short and long term (Daros et al., 2021; Moltrecht et al., 2020).

Second Step® Middle School emotion-management lessons emphasize coping effectively with situations that provoke strong feelings. Students are taught proactive strategies, such as deep, centered breathing and positive self-talk, to prevent negative feelings from escalating into negative behavior. The ability to keep from responding emotionally enables students to employ many of the other skills taught in the program, such as perspective-taking and problem-solving.

In addition to more traditional emotion-management and calming-down strategies, Second Step® Middle School also helps students learn to be more aware of their emotions without having to act on them. Practicing noticing emotions without immediately acting on them helps students gain impulse control and step back from emotional experiences in ways that can increase their ability to choose how to respond, rather than simply reacting to situations (Hayes et al., 2012; Teasdale et al., 2002).

## Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Being able to identify, understand, and respond in a caring way to how someone is feeling provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior, friendships, and conflict resolution (Batanova & Loukas, 2014). As children mature into adolescence, they develop a greater ability to

understand and respond to other people's feelings and an improved ability to see things from others' perspectives.

Youth with better perspective-taking skills are more likely to offer emotional support to others (Litvack-Miller et al., 1997), and adolescents with more empathy report behaving more helpfully than their peers (McMahon, et al., 2006). Youth who develop higher empathy are also less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to their peers (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). In addition, research shows that students with a higher level of empathetic concerns (feelings of sympathy, compassion, and concern) toward other people are more likely to help the victims of aggression (Van Cleemput et al., 2014).

Guiding principles also serve an important role in strengthening the link between perspective-taking and positive actions toward peers. When students have a commitment to showing care and concern for others and treating them with respect, it increases positive behavior toward others, especially when students have more empathy (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010; Yeager, et al. 2013). Second Step® Middle School lessons are intended to help students be more aware of and able to tolerate difficult emotions, which helps to strengthen the likelihood that empathy and perspective-taking will result in compassionate action.

## Conclusion

Second Step® Middle School helps students in early adolescence cope with challenges, create and maintain positive relationships, and succeed both socially and academically. The engaging lessons equip students with the mindsets, knowledge, and skills they need to handle strong emotions, make and follow through on good decisions, and create strong friendships while avoiding or de-escalating peer conflicts.

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