



Preventing prejudice and improving intergroup attitudes: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent training programs ☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a meta-analysis of 81 research reports containing 122 intervention–control comparisons of structured programs to reduce prejudice or promote positive intergroup attitudes in children and adolescents. Overall, the analysis revealed a mean effect size of $d = 0.30$, indicating low to moderate intervention effects. From the great variety of different approaches, interventions based on direct contact experiences along with social-cognitive training programs designed to promote empathy and perspective taking showed the strongest effect sizes. In addition, effects varied according to the program participant's social status (higher effects for majority groups), the target out-group (lower effect sizes for ethnic vs. disabled and aged out-groups), and the type of outcome assessment (higher effects for cognitive vs. affective and behavioral measures of intergroup attitudes). The discussion considers several limitations including the lack of implementation and follow-up research as well as future direction of research on promoting intergroup relations.

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Prejudice and other forms of negative intergroup attitudes cause serious social problems in many societies throughout the world. Even in their mildest form, the consequences for human beings may include social exclusion and segregation, health and behavioral problems, poorer chances on the labor market, and even a generally more negative quality of life (see, e.g., [Paradies, 2006](#); [Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003](#)). Previous social-developmental research has indicated clearly that prejudice and other forms of biased intergroup attitudes are not just restricted to adulthood, but that children start to favor their own social group as soon as the basic processes of social categorization and identification emerge in early childhood (see [Levy & Killen, 2008](#); [Raabe & Beelmann, 2011](#)).

Although definitions of prejudice have changed over the last decades (see [Duckitt, 2010](#)), it can generally be viewed as “any attitude, emotion, or behavior toward members of a group, which directly or indirectly implies some negativity or antipathy toward that group” ([Brown, 2010, p. 7](#)). According to this definition, prejudice may have different manifestations and is multifaceted in nature. On a global level, one can first differentiate between in-group preference (e.g., ascribing more positive characteristics to our own social group) and out-group derogation (ascribing more negative characteristics to the social group we do not belong to). These seem to be distinct constructs, although they have

common negative consequences for out-group members ([Brewer, 1999](#)). In addition, negative attitudes also have a multifaceted character and are normally divided into a cognitive component (attributing negative characteristics such as being mean or aggressive to members of the out-group), an emotional component (e.g., liking them less), and a behavioral component (e.g., exhibiting negative behavior such as social exclusion). In line with the broad range of different operationalizations, recent social-developmental research has studied prejudice within a broader framework of intergroup attitude development. This has led to the identification of important individual and social developmental factors and processes. For example, it has been proposed that cognitive and social-cognitive abilities such as classification skills and perspective taking ([Aboud, 1988](#); [Bigler & Liben, 2007](#)), the development of social identity ([Nesdale, 2004](#)), or moral decision making ([Killen & Rutland, 2011](#)) are crucial contributors to intergroup attitude development in children. Other research has focused more on social variables such as intergroup contact and cross-group friendships ([Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011](#)), social norms ([Rutland, 2004](#)), and intergroup threat ([Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005](#); [Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006](#)).

However, although all this research documents major scientific progress in understanding the emergence of prejudiced attitudes, there is an ongoing debate over which are the most important individual and social factors that need to be addressed in systematic interventions designed to prevent negative intergroup attitudes and associated problems of intolerance and discrimination in intergroup relations ([Killen, Rutland, & Ruck, 2011](#); [Tropp & Mallett, 2011](#)). As a result, rather diverse intervention programs have been developed and tested during the last 30 years (e.g., [Oskamp, 2000](#); [Stephan & Stephan, 2001](#)). The present meta-analysis summarizes research on

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the effectiveness of standardized psychological and educational intervention programs to prevent or reduce prejudice or otherwise promote positive intergroup attitudes and relations in childhood and adolescence. It studies the general effectiveness as well as specific effects indicating which program will be the best alternative for whom and on what outcome measure.

Interventions aiming to promote intergroup attitudes and relations have a long history and can be traced back to the integrative school systems movement in the United States (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954) and to Allport's (1954) classic work on the psychological nature of prejudice. Both initiatives generated a great deal of empirical research (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Schofield, 1995; Schofield & Hausmann, 2004), particularly in the social context of schools and universities, and this has led to a variety of intervention concepts. Other approaches place more emphasis on education in political values (e.g., democracy), multicultural diversity, morality, and values such as equality, respect, and tolerance (Stephan & Vogt, 2004). Despite their different histories and disciplinary roots, all these approaches are based on the assumption that prejudice and negative intergroup attitudes are associated with a number of social problems and phenomena within our societies such as the social exclusion and discrimination of ethnic minorities, immigrants, the handicapped, or other groups; racism, hate crimes, and right-wing extremism; or even international conflicts. Therefore, preventing prejudice and negative intergroup attitudes is assumed to be an appropriate tool for avoiding or at least reducing these problems and generally promoting more positive intergroup relations, tolerance, and justice within our societies.

In an earlier review of this research with children and adolescents, Aboud and Levy (2000) distinguished between five groups of interventions ranging from integrated schooling, bilingual education, multicultural education, promoting social-cognitive skills, to training in role-playing and empathy. They classified these as being based on three different theoretical concepts about intergroup attitudes (see also Killen et al., 2011). The first most prominent theoretical concept is founded on the *intergroup contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). This states that contact between members of different social groups leads to less prejudiced attitudes and generally promotes positive intergroup relations. This effect of intergroup contact is even more pronounced when the situation complies with the criteria of positive contact, that is, an equal status of members of both social groups within the situation, support for the contact from authorities, and cooperation in achieving a joint goal. The intergroup contact hypothesis is one of the best supported theories in social psychology with hundreds of studies showing that the effects apparently hold for a variety of different situations, settings, and samples (see Paluck & Green, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, for reviews). Well-known examples of this intervention type are integrated schooling, cooperative learning techniques, or even public campaigns with high-profile individuals from the social out-group. In addition, recent extensions of intergroup contact theory have led to programs based on the idea of extended, that is, indirect contact—for example, when someone gets to know an in-group member who is in contact with an out-group member (see Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

The second theoretical construct refers to *general socialization theory* and *social learning theory*. This assumes that social experiences, knowledge, and information about the social world and social out-groups as well as knowledge about relevant concepts in the context of intergroup attitudes (e.g., information about prejudice, democratic values, and cultural diversity) lead to more positive intergroup relations. Multicultural or antibias training programs are good examples for these knowledge- and information-based interventions.

Finally, the third theoretical construct is *social-cognitive developmental theory*. In general, it assumes that children's intergroup attitudes often reflect their stage in sociocognitive development and that the increasing development of distinct sociocognitive abilities leads to a decreasing tendency to have biased attitudes. This forms the basis for

trainings in cognitive and social-cognitive skills (e.g., classification skills, social categorization, perspective taking, conflict resolution, moral decision making) that interrelate with the development of intergroup attitudes.

Aboud and Levy's (2000) classification of interventions into three different theoretical concepts is, of course, neither independent nor exhaustive. Because they are grounded in diverse scientific disciplines such as social and developmental psychology, multicultural education, sociology of migration and diversity, criminal justice, or politics, there are several ways to classify interventions in this field. For example, Paluck and Green (2009) recently presented an extended review of prejudice reduction interventions that distinguished between categories such as cooperative learning, entertainment strategies using books or films, discussion and peer influence, and instruction. Other authors such as Killen et al. (2011) have differentiated between interventions to promote intergroup attitudes by influencing peer relations, adult-child interaction, and social-cognitive judgments. In a recently published article, Aboud et al. (2012) differentiated between contact-based, media/instruction-based, and antibias/multicultural interventions. These and other examples illustrate that interventions in this field could possibly be best characterized as a mixture of programs with diverse underlying theories, goals, contents, strategic concepts, and intervention methods.

Perhaps as a consequence of this diversity in classifying intergroup interventions, the outcomes of systematic evaluations in this field have revealed no clear empirical consensus on what should be viewed as the best way to prevent prejudice and promote positive intergroup attitudes among children and adolescents (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Paluck & Green, 2009). However, several meta-analyses and systematic reviews point to some promising approaches. For example, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) comprehensive meta-analysis on the *intergroup contact hypothesis* showed that programs based on contact between members of different social groups seem to be of central value in influencing intergroup attitudes independent of age, type of attitudes, cultures, and social conditions. Aboud et al. (2012) confirmed these results even for young children under the age of 8. Likewise, several educational techniques seem to offer promising ways of reducing prejudice. For example, intensive studies on the effects of *cooperative learning techniques* (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 2000; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008) have shown that they markedly increase not only school and academic achievement but also interpersonal attraction and relations between members of different ethnic groups in the classroom compared with individual and competitively oriented learning strategies.

Other approaches such as *multicultural, diversity, and antiracism training programs* have a somewhat more limited empirical foundation, but also seem to produce low to moderate, but nonetheless positive, effect sizes on prejudice—at least in adult populations (Paluck & Green, 2009; Stephan, Renfro, & Stephan, 2004; Verkuyten, 2010). Empirical evaluations of *cognitive and social-cognitive programs* are also basically positive, showing that a reduction in biased judgment processes and prejudice can be achieved (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Paluck & Green, 2009). Nonetheless, especially in this field, any final conclusion is difficult to reach, because this label covers a wide variety of different approaches such as programs to improve cognitive skills (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1992), social perspective taking and empathy (e.g., bystander interventions, see Stephan & Finlay, 1999), moral development (e.g., value self-confrontation, see Grube, Mayton, & Ball-Rokeach, 1994), and conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

In sum, a variety of measures have been applied to improve intergroup relations and prevent prejudice. However, most of the aforementioned and other reviews (see Beelmann, 2009) do not focus specifically on psychological and educational programs with children and adolescents (Paluck & Green, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), are limited to ages 8 and below and do not use a meta-analytic approach (Aboud et al., 2012), are narrative in nature, or somewhat outdated (Aboud &

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