



## The life skills program IPSY: Positive influences on school bonding and prevention of substance misuse

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Life skills program  
Substance misuse  
School bonding  
Mediation

The present study investigated whether a life skills program (LSP) for the prevention of adolescent substance misuse can have positive influences on a school context and on school bonding. The study also explored whether effects on alcohol use are mediated by positive effects on school bonding resulting from program participation. The LSP IPSY (Information + Psychosocial Competence = Protection) was implemented over a 3-year period via specially trained teachers. Analyses were based on a German evaluation study utilizing a quasi-experimental design (intervention/control) with school-wise assignment to the respective groups. Analyses were based on four measurement points ( $N = 952$ , 10 years at pre-test). Results indicated that IPSY was well implemented, highly accepted by teachers and students, and that teachers profited regarding their teaching methods. ANCOVAs revealed positive program effects on alcohol use and school bonding. Multiple regressions indicated that positive influences on school bonding following program participation partially mediated effects on alcohol use.

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### Introduction

There is a wide range of prevention programs that try to reduce adolescent problem behavior, such as the misuse of legal substances like alcohol and tobacco. Most of these programs are based on theoretical assumptions and empirical findings concerning the development of adolescent substance use. Universal prevention strategies, which attempt to reach adolescents before substance use first occurs, try to reduce the impact of developmental risk factors, to increase the influence of protective factors, and to support adolescents in coping with their age-related challenges (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). The most effective programs have been found to be those that teach comprehensive life skills, such as communication skills, problem solving, and assertiveness (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). They are based on the social-influence approach, which focuses on norms (e.g., normative expectations about substance use) and includes social skills development, such as, learning to resist peer pressure (Donaldson et al., 1996). Aims for the prevention of substance misuse in adolescence include delaying the onset of legal substances use, encouraging responsible use, and reducing age-related increases in consumption rates (Montagne & Scott, 1993). From meta-analyses, we know that school-based programs using interactive methods can be particularly effective in these aims (Cuijpers, 2002; Tobler et al., 2000).

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The factors found to be crucial for the effectiveness of prevention programs have been shown to be best transmitted via school-based life skills programs (LSPs; Botvin & Griffin, 2004; Tobler et al., 2000). Life skills were defined by the WHO (1997) as skills and competencies that enable children and adolescents to deal adequately with their daily challenges and their developmental tasks. Core life skills in the intra- and interpersonal domain are communication skills, empathy, assertiveness, problem solving and decision making skills, coping with emotions and stress, critical and creative thinking, and the ability to build and maintain positive relationships: LSPs focus on the training of these generic intra- and interpersonal competencies. In combination with continuous support and positive reinforcement of the trained behavior, the promotion of substance-specific skills (e.g., resistance skills), change in attitudes, and an increase in relevant knowledge (e.g., about actual prevalence rates) should lead to healthy outcomes in children and adolescents (WHO, 1997).

LSPs are mostly implemented within a school context and thereby also aim at the general enrichment of the school, which is one of the most important developmental contexts for children and adolescents. Moreover, LSPs can include components focusing explicitly on aspects of the school context, such as teaching strategies and school bonding (Weichold, 2008). In addition, the interactive teaching methods used in LSPs provide contact and communication opportunities between the students and the teachers, and allow feedback from teachers or other students to be received in a non-threatening climate. In this way, a well implemented LSP should contribute to fostering positive attitudes towards school, teachers, and classmates, and should support involvement in and bonding to school.

LSPs have already been shown to be effective in preventing adolescent misuse of legal and illegal substances (e.g., Botvin, 2000; Skara & Sussman, 2003), but few evaluation studies have analyzed why these programs are effective or elicited what mediating processes may be involved (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). This is extremely important, in that the identification of mediators is crucial for learning which components of an LSP are effective in preventing substance misuse and thereby enabling existing programs to be optimized. Furthermore, knowledge of the underlying processes is germane to understanding the etiology of problem behaviors (Howe, Reiss, & Yuh, 2002). In fact, there have been evaluation studies on other drug abuse prevention programs, such as social-influences-based programs, which have analyzed mediation effects. Most found that effects on adolescent substance use were obtained by influencing students' norms and beliefs about substances (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 1991), although some also found peer influence and resistance skills to be important mediators (e.g., Orlando, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Longshore, 2005).

In general, the underlying assumption of the life skills approach is that the prevention of problem behavior is aided by the promotion of general and specific skills (WHO, 1997). Thus, it is likely that improvements in intra- and interpersonal competencies may contribute to the effectiveness of an LSP. Indeed, in the current literature, the promotion of generic life skills, a reduction of peer influence in adolescents' decision making processes, and the increase in knowledge after participation in an LSP, are discussed as potential mediators of the positive effects on substance use (Cuijpers, 2002). However, there is a lack of consistency across studies concerning the impact of interventions on these variables. There are even studies that obtained unexpected results in terms of positive program effects on drug use but found no effects on the hypothesized mediators (e.g., drug refusal skills; Botvin & Griffin, 2004).

Previous research on the LSP IPSY (Information + Psychosocial Competence = Protection) found that decreased susceptibility to peer pressure following program participation did partially mediate program effects on substance use (Weichold, Wenzel, & Silbereisen, 2007; Wenzel, Weichold, & Silbereisen, 2007). However, mediation effects were rather weak and none of the other skills or knowledge variables affected by the program (e.g., knowledge on assertiveness, communication skills) was found to be a significant mediator, indicating that there might be something else effective in preventing substance misuse. The question remains, therefore, as to which variables may account for the positive influence of an LSP on substance use.

With regard to school-related variables such as school bonding, little seems to be known about the role they play in the effectiveness of LSPs, and to our knowledge no study has tested school bonding explicitly as a mediating variable. From the literature, however, we do know that school bonding is a protective factor against problem behaviors like substance misuse (e.g., Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), and that through attachment and close relationships with people at school (teachers, students), as well as a commitment to the school's prosocial norms and values adolescents can build strong social bonds to their school. Once established, these bonds can inhibit problem behaviors, such as substance misuse, that are inconsistent with the positive norms and values of the school.

Numerous studies have found evidence for the association between school bonding and adolescent substance use (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). For instance, data from the Monitoring the Future study showed that higher levels of school bonding in 8th-grade students were associated with less concurrent cigarette and alcohol use (Bryant, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2003). In addition, Henry, Swaim, and Slater (2005) found that adolescents in 6th and 7th grade who were more strongly bonded to school were also more likely to perceive substance use as a risk for their future aspirations. Others have shown that school bonding represents an important developmental asset known to be related to positive developmental outcomes (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Weichold, 2007). Data from the "Health Behavior among School-aged Children" survey from the World Health Organization showed that students who feel able to participate actively in the classroom, to influence rules and regulations at school, and believe they are supported by their teachers are more satisfied with school (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998). For these reasons, it seems likely that an LSP containing lessons which focus explicitly on school, such as student participation in school-related issues and the promotion of positive relationships to teachers and classmates, can promote school bonding and thereby positively influence the adolescents' consumption behavior of substances like alcohol. Therefore, although school bonding may not be the explicit target of an LSP,

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