

RAND NEW STUDY

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*Washington External Affairs Office
703-413-1100 x5431*

*wea@rand.org
www.rand.org/congress*

Helping Children Cope with Violence: The Potential of a School-Based Program

Today's children are increasingly exposed to violence, ranging from witnessing violent acts to being victims themselves. Unless these children receive help now in coping with violence-related psychological trauma, they are more likely to suffer from emotional and behavioral problems that will follow them into adulthood.

There are many federal mental health service programs intended to help children who have experienced violence, but none of these programs has withstood a rigorous evaluation to see whether it worked. A school-based mental health program in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of Los Angeles has now passed that test.

A recent randomized control study led by RAND Health researcher Dr. Bradley Stein found that the program—known as the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in School (CBITS)—helps students exposed to violence. In particular, sixth-grade students who complete the program have significantly fewer symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. Parents also report that their children are functioning much better, and children and parents report seeing the same level of improvement several months after the program ended. Because the program is provided in schools, it is accessible to many families who face obstacles such as lack of insurance, transportation problems, and time conflicts in bringing their children to more traditional treatment settings.

The CBITS program consists of ten group sessions, one individual session per student, four meetings with parents, and an educational session with teachers. Using such methods as talking, drawing, and writing, students learn how to cope with their prior exposure to violence and receive training to help them deal in the future with stressful or anxious situations, negative thoughts, and other real-life problems.

CBITS is a collaboration between school-based mental health clinicians from the Los Angeles Unified School District and clinician-researchers from RAND and the University of California at Los Angeles. The program has been well received by the parents, students, and school personnel who participated, and other school districts have expressed interest in adopting it.