



Advocacy for Prevention Science

This document is intended to provide prevention scientists with a guide for advocating for prevention science. It is hoped that it will help prevention scientists articulate the value of prevention science and the specific things that need to happen if the tremendous potential of prevention science is to be realized.

The Nature and Value of Prevention Science

- 1. Epidemiological and etiological research has identified numerous biological, psychological, social and environmental risk and protective factors that influence health behavior and positive well being as well as disorder, problems and illness. This research has contributed to the development of programs and policies that have demonstrated efficacy to prevent behavioral and health problems and promote well-being by targeting these empirically identified risk and protective factors.**
- 2. Careful experimental evaluation enables the identification of programs and policies that can prevent problems of human behavior. SPR has articulated key features of such evaluations, which are available on the SPR website (<http://www.preventionresearch.org/StandardsofEvidencebook.pdf>). Critical features of such research for identifying useful interventions include; random assignment to the program vs. a comparison condition or a strong quasi-experimental design, precise specification and measurement of the outcomes to achieved, experimental evaluation that controls for the possibility that factors other than the intervention led to the outcome, long term follow-up of the effects of the program over developmental periods and replication of the evaluation in real-world settings.**
- 3. Through rigorous evaluation, a number of programs and policies have been identified that have demonstrated efficacy to prevent the development of problems of human health and behavior.**

Research has demonstrated that some preventive interventions can be effective for reducing problems of health and human behavior. This research has reached a point where we can identify categories of preventive interventions that have demonstrated their efficacy to prevent multiple problem outcomes which are of high cost and high concern to our society. Thus, we believe that there is compelling evidence that enables us to advocate for certain types of programs. For example, systematic reviews of research have demonstrated:

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- Classroom-based preventive interventions that can significantly reduce antisocial behavior and substance use (Gottfredson, Wilson, & Najaka, 2002; Gottfredson & Wilson, 2003; Tobler & Stratton, 1997)
- School-wide practices that have been shown to significantly reduce antisocial behavior and substance use (Gottfredson, Wilson, & Najaka, 2002)
- Parenting interventions that reduce antisocial behavior (Barlow, 1997; Farrington & Welsh, 2002; Webster-Stratton, C., & Taylor, T., 2001)
- Reading instructional practices that can prevent reading failure (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001),

Existing evidence in no way guarantees that prevention outcomes will be achieved whenever the interventions evaluated in these studies are implemented. In most cases, more research is needed to determine whether the success of these interventions can be replicated in real-world settings by others, and how programs and policies can be effectively disseminated. Available research points to the enormous potential of research-based preventive interventions. And, it points to the value of continued research, which increasingly tests interventions in diverse real-world settings.

- 4. Although some preventive interventions have been experimentally evaluated, there are many others that are in widespread use, but have not been evaluated. In addition, some widely used programs and policies have been evaluated and have not been found to be effective. These programs often utilize public funds that might more productively be used by implementing programs that have demonstrated effectiveness.**
- 5. Given the accumulation of prevention programs and policies that have been found to have some benefit when evaluated in well-controlled settings, we have reached a stage in the development of prevention science where interventions need to be evaluated in real-world settings and research needs to be conducted on how to effectively disseminate empirically supported policies and programs.**
- 6. The ongoing monitoring of well-being, problem behavior, and risk and protective factors for problems is an essential practice for guiding prevention efforts and for ensuring that prevention practices continue to achieve their hoped-for effects.**

These points suggest a unique role that SPR can play in public discussions of common problems of human beings. We are the scientists. What we have to contribute are principles, methods, and findings that can better guide society toward lowering the prevalence of the most common and costly problems of human behavior. In speaking on behalf of these principles, but not—at this point—in favor of specific legislation, we can build an understanding of the principles we espouse. When we take positions that don't neatly support all the things other groups are advocating (such as funding SDFS without regard to the effectiveness of what is implemented) we will become more credible.

Implications for SPR's Advocacy

Given the current strong state of prevention science and our understanding of what has contributed to it, prevention scientists need to advocate for the following:

Support of Empirically Based Prevention Practices

1. Prevention practices should be implemented that have been shown through experimental evaluation to have a beneficial effect on one or more targeted problems.
2. Prevention practices that have been found through appropriate experimental procedures to have no benefit, or to have more harm than benefit, should not be funded and, where available, practices that are empirically supported should be substituted for them.
3. Prevention practices that have not been evaluated or for which evidence of their impact is unclear, should be experimentally evaluated.

Braided Funding

4. Given the growing evidence for the efficacy of preventive interventions, when evaluated in well-funded and carefully controlled evaluations, there is a strong need for research that evaluates the effectiveness of these programs and policies when they are widely implemented in real-world settings.
5. Evidence of the beneficial effects of preventive interventions also implies the need for more research on how efficacious preventive interventions can be widely and effectively disseminated.
6. Both dissemination research and research on real-world effectiveness will be facilitated by braided funding, in which agencies that fund research support the experimental evaluation of prevention programs and policies, which are funded by agencies that fund prevention services.

Use of the Standards of Evidence

7. Empirical support for prevention practices should be evaluated on the basis of the standards of evidence that have been articulated by the Society for Prevention Research. (<http://www.preventionresearch.org/StandardsofEvidencebook.pdf>). The standards indicate when it is appropriate to conclude that a preventive intervention is sufficiently supported that it is ready for widespread dissemination. Use of these standards would improve the prevention of many health and behavior problems.
8. Evaluations of preventive interventions should be guided by the SPR standards of evidence which specify the optimal procedures for determining the effects of a prevention practice. Growth in our ability to prevent problems of human behavior would be greatly accelerated if more resources were put into evaluating preventive interventions using these standards.

Monitoring Human Well-Being

9. Communities, states, and nations will accelerate the evolution of good preventive practices by expanding the use of systems for the ongoing monitoring of human well-being. Systems which assess the prevalence of problems of children, adolescents, and adults allow us to monitor trends in well-being. If those systems also monitor individual and environmental risk and protective factors, they will focus attention on the most important factors affecting well-being.

Continuing Research on the Factors That Influence Problems

10. Continued funding of epidemiological and etiological research is needed in order to better understand the factors that influence unhealthy or risky behavior, as well as the factors that promote health and well-being. Increased understanding of the relationships between biological and social and environmental risk and protective factors may be of particular value. Studies that involve the experimental manipulation of purported influences on problems are of particular value because they provide the strongest evidence that the manipulated factor have a causal influences on problem outcomes, and they form the foundation for the next generation of prevention programs to improve the public health.

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