

# Pilot Study Finds Social Skills Lessons Have Major Benefit for At-Risk Children

**A** two-year pilot study led by Graduate School of Psychology Professor Janet Kilian found that specialized social skills counseling lessons had a much greater-than-anticipated benefit for at-risk students, leading to significant improvements not only in behavior but in academic performance as well.

Dr. Kilian presented the findings of the pilot study in May 2009 at the Society for Prevention Research conference in Washington D.C. and discussed aspects of the social skills program last August at the American Psychological Association's annual convention in Toronto.

"We had more success than we expected," Dr. Kilian said. "The pilot study shows that if you can help intensive-needs at-risk students develop the social relating skills they need to get along in school and negotiate the environment to solve their problems, it tremendously decreases all the discipline and interpersonal types of problems, and the children also seem to be able to concentrate more on their school work, improving their academic achievement including state test scores and classroom grades."

The pilot study addressed the social skills deficiencies of 35 children in grades 3 to 6 at a multiethnic school in Nassau County who did not respond to PROJECT ACHIEVE, a school-wide social skills problem-solving program developed by renowned psychologist and school reform expert Howard Knoff.

Dr. Kilian developed specialized social skills counseling lessons for the 35 at-risk students to deal with issues such as bullying, violence and aggression that correlated with the school-wide PROJECT ACHIEVE program. For each monthly social skills lesson being taught in the school-wide program, Dr. Kilian developed four weekly counseling lessons for the at-risk children utilizing a manual that explained what they needed to do



Janet Kilian, Psy.D.

step-by-step. Led by psychology interns and externs supervised by Dr. Kilian, the at-risk students met for about half an hour a week over the course of a two-year period for their social skills lessons in which interactive activities were implemented in a club-like format for small groups of children.

"The impact of the 'manualized' counseling lessons was much more positive than expected and bodes extremely well for preventing significant problems for at-risk children later in life," Dr. Kilian said. "I'm really excited about this because if we can find some programs for these hard-core students that help them, then the trajectory of how their lives are going to go by the time they're older can start to be turned around in a positive direction. A lot of these children don't have to go down a path of serious problems later in life once they become teenagers. If children have difficult home lives, they have a second chance in school if they have a school environment that really works for them. This kind of

program will help them have that." Dr. Kilian cautioned, however, that there needs to be further sampling and research to verify her findings since the social skills program is a pilot study.

**T**he at-risk students in the program demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in office referrals for discipline problems. Each child had more than 16 office referrals per year before the specialized counseling program and less than one, or 0.46 referrals on average, by the end of the second year of the program. Twenty-two of the 35 students, or 63 percent, decreased their office referrals to 0 per year while 13 of the 35, or 37 percent, saw their office referrals drop to three or less per year.

In terms of academic performance, half of the 35 children had below passing grades of D or F in reading before the specialized social skills program, and all but one, who had a grade of D, were passing at the end of two years. In math, six of the students were failing before the program was implemented compared to all 35 passing with grades of C or better after two years. In addition, 14 of the children saw their report card marks improve by one grade or more.

The other measure utilized in the study was New York State standardized tests for math and English Language Arts. Twenty-five of 35 children, or 71 percent, were proficient and 10, or 29 percent, were not proficient in ELA before the specialized counseling lessons. That compared to 33 out of the 35 children, or 94 percent, demonstrating proficiency in ELA and only two, or six percent, still not proficient after the specialized program. In addition, 12 children increased their scores on the standardized test by one level. The results were similar for the New York State standardized tests in math.

The results of the pilot study are even more impressive when compared to the comparison group—another school in the same district with similar demographics whose intensive-needs students were awaiting the implementation of a social skills program. In the comparison school, office referrals for the equivalent group of 36 at-risk children nearly tripled on average from seven a year to about 19 over the same two-year period of the pilot study. By the end of the program, 34 out of 36 students, or 94 percent, experienced an increase in office referrals for discipline issues, with the number of referrals per student ranging from five to 50 a year.

The report card grades of the at-risk students in the comparison group indicated a downward trend in both reading and math. On the state standardized tests for math, 48 percent of the students were initially below proficiency but that number rose to 70 percent at the end of the two years in the absence of the ‘manualized’ social skills counseling lessons.

On the ELA standardized tests, 58 percent of students in the comparison school were below proficiency after the two-year period, up from 50 percent beforehand.

“The control group is plateauing or getting worse where our youngsters are improving in many areas including academics,” said Dr. Kilian. “We were hoping to make some inroads behaviorally but didn’t know we would make inroads academically.”

Dr. Kilian said she plans to submit an article about the pilot study this year that she hopes will be accepted for publication in the *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, where she authored an article in 2006 on the effective implementation of PROJECT ACHIEVE in the same suburban elementary school.

She is also working on publishing the ‘manualized’ social skills counseling lessons this year as an ancillary component of the PROJECT ACHIEVE program so the lessons can be accessed online and utilized by psychologists, teachers, counselors and other education professionals

in schools around the country.

Dr. Kilian said that while most schools don’t have the staff or resources to deal with these at-risk students individually, the ‘manualized’ social skills counseling program provides a much more cost-effective means for working with them in a group setting and having educators other than psychologists implement the program.

“There is virtually nothing written up in our psychological research literature about how to help these intensive-needs at-risk children,” she said. “There’s minimal prevention that goes on anywhere in the schools for these kinds of youngsters who are the more intensive-needs at-risk children so in a lot of ways they kind of get written off by default. And these are the children that typically wind up with adolescent and adult problems having to do with mental health, addiction and criminality. It’s hard to intervene after these hard-core problems have already developed, which is why an early intervention program like this can be very successful.” ■

### Graduate School of Psychology Students Selected for DOE Bilingual Internships

Four students in Touro College’s Master of Science in School Psychology program have been chosen for the New York City Department of Education’s (DOE) bilingual psychologist-in-training internship program, a prestigious and paid internship awarded to only 30 graduate students in the New York metropolitan area.

“I’m proud of our students and faculty,” said Dr. Mel Imas, former director of Touro College’s Master of School Psychology program. “It is a great accomplishment to see how well our students are doing in competition with other school psychology programs. We have earned four highly competitive and very highly-prized scholarships in the psychologist-in-training program, a higher percentage than any of the other schools I know of.”

Dr. Imas said that approximately 120 students apply for the bilingual internships each year. Each student earns \$40,000 plus benefits through the DOE internship program. “If 120 students applied, and four out of the 30 who were awarded the internships are from Touro, we’re obviously producing a very good student. In addition, it is satisfying to know that our students will be hired the following year by the New York City Department of Education as full-time practicing school psychologists.”

As part of the DOE program, students agree to work an additional year for the Department of Education after they graduate at a typical starting salary of approximately \$55,000. Students also have to pass a New York State language exam and go through an extensive interview process.

The bilingual DOE psychologist-in-training program is one of the few paid school psychology internships in the New York

City region. To earn their graduate degree and New York State certification, all students have to complete a 1200-hour, full school-year internship.

The Touro students in the bilingual internship program this year are Jeanette Lam and Carol Tang, who are fluent in Chinese, and Cindy Rodriguez and Esmery De Jesus, who are fluent in Spanish. Currently, the greatest need is for bilingual Spanish-speaking school psychologists.

One of the reasons Touro is so successful in placing students in the psychologist-in-training internships—the college has placed 17 students in the program in the past eight years—is because of the college’s multicultural and multilingual student body, Dr. Imas said. “Currently, we have one of the largest school psychology programs in the United States and within our program is quite a large multicultural and multilingual diversified student body.”

As part of the program, the interns receive extensive in-house training for the first month and are then placed in New York City public schools, where they are trained as bilingual school psychologists with the help of a mentor/supervisor. In addition, the DOE program provides full-day training sessions every Friday at participating colleges that have students in the internship program including Touro College, Brooklyn College, Queens College, Fordham University, Columbia University’s Teachers College, St. John’s University, Pace University and Mercy College. The interns come to Touro twice during the year to attend training sessions on topics such as childhood obesity, successful counseling techniques and evaluating a child’s intelligence in relation to academic performance. ■