

## **Part III: RALLY Assessments and Evaluation**

### Chapter 7: Holistic Consideration Towards Student Assessments

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Assessments are an important component for providing the most adequate program services to support student growth and success. This chapter outlines a holistic approach to student assessments.

## Holistic Consideration Towards Student Assessments

Too often, student's problems, but also their strengths and resiliencies remain undetected in schools. This problem has been recognized, and there is a trend where schools are increasingly employing mental health screenings to supplement their academic assessments. In this chapter, we describe the rationale for assessing the youth in the conceptual approach taken by RALLY (see Chapter 2), a holistic perspective that covers the most relevant areas in the youth's life we consider worthy to be assessed under a developmental, relational, and contextual frame. We also use our assessment as an example in designing an assessment that purposely aims to understand the overall well being of the youth, while increasing the ease of implementation and utilization. By exploring these topics under an overarching holistic perspective, we hope to thoroughly understand the well being of the individual youths in our prevention program. In particular, we emphasize how such a perspective can help to guide the type of measures one might incorporate in a prevention program to adequately provide information about the whole of the child.

Assessment can be thought of as a critical aspect of a youth programs. An assessment should help to set goals for all staff and youth those involved in the program by carefully observing and tracking development, academic work, and resiliency to determine program focus for each individual. For instance, promoting youth development, academic success and personal resilience requires not only knowledge of the youth's level of behavioral or academic performance, but an understanding of the extent to which behavioral or academic change might have occurred in the youth. In doing so, it should grasp the nature of the youth's relationships with teachers, peers,

parents, and the community and pinpoint areas of both risk and resiliency. A comprehensive understanding helps to generate ideas in directing the program course that best addresses the need of adolescents and those who work with them. On a broader level, assessment should help to inform policy by indicating where and how policy change should take place.<sup>1</sup>

### *Assessments in Schools*

Given that school and afterschool programs could assess a never-ending list of factors deemed important in adolescents' behavioral and academic performance, it is important to target the most relevant factors in the promotion of youth development, and to assess them as comprehensively as possible given the logistic constraints. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 prompted increased attention toward school based assessment. Since then, the Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) has been instituted in schools nationwide to understand why individual problem behaviors occur.<sup>2</sup> The FBA was an important first step in school assessments for behavior and proposes a comprehensive assessment with the inclusion of questionnaires, teacher interviews, and observations, both natural and manipulated. Although it is widely used, it also has limitations, including the focus on misbehavior rather than on resiliency, and the rote approach that school staff often takes. Both are largely due to the lack of theoretical training and resource support provided to them which results in little consideration for the developmental and contextual factors that are crucial to understanding problem behavior.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there is often a lack of integration between the efforts of those who conduct such an assessment (teachers, outside consultants) with school staff (coordinators) who link the student and parents

with outside services using the FBA.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the FBA is often used with the most at-risk children in the form of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), thus, singling out and potentially stigmatizing the children who need services. What may be less stigmatizing yet efficient are screens that are administered to all students in the school, such as the TeenScreen which is used to determine suicidality in high schoolers.<sup>5</sup> To our knowledge, however, the existing school based assessments provide little information regarding the overall well being of the child including developmental or contextual factors.<sup>6</sup>

RALLY takes a theoretically based holistic perspective that aims to understand adolescent functioning from a developmental and relational perspective in an integrative way (see Chapter 2). The holistic perspective is not a “set” of measures, but rather, a purposeful way of thinking about how to obtain relevant information about youth development, education, and personal resiliency. A holistic assessment is linked with the services provided; all assessments and services are housed within the same system where all students take part. The main factors considered important to include are developmental level, resiliencies, risks, and social relationships, all of which play a role in the adolescent’s social and emotional functioning. Considering these factors helps to generate a holistic picture of the individual adolescent by identifying emerging or existing risks to address while also considering strengths to promote. Rather than focusing on the techniques of administering an assessment, as is often the mentality found with following current assessment protocols, we are encouraging practitioners or youth workers to begin thinking in terms of these factors as they work with their students.

The goals for assessment in a prevention program are admittedly lofty. Striking a balance with all the theoretical and practical considerations to increase the potential for an assessment is crucial for producing positive behavioral change and academic gains in students. This chapter describes the various considerations adopted in the development of the holistic assessment used in RALLY, the aspects of adolescents' experience that we felt were important to assess, and the measures used which we felt would best fit the assessment goals, and the way we chose to incorporate it in the overall model.

#### *Practical Considerations for Implementing a Holistic Assessment*

Concerns pertaining to the collaboration and pragmatics of the different systems (e.g. school, community) needed to be addressed with the design and implementation of the assessment.<sup>7</sup> First and foremost, the assessment needed to address the concerns of the neighborhood community that it serves and to elevate the values in which they espouse. For instance, if it is important for the community that teachers are supported in their classroom teaching and behavioral management and/or that student participation is promoted in an afterschool programming, the assessment needed to provide student information to these youth workers so they could determine the best way the community believes that the individual students can benefit from the services.

Second, one of the major problems in conducting assessment in the schools is the protracted time in evaluating and referring a child for services.<sup>8</sup> As teachers get to know their students, they may realize that an assessment would be useful in pinpointing student needs. The typical process in a school system often consists of teachers submitting a request for their student to obtain an assessment a couple of months after the beginning of the school year. For various reasons the administering and interpretation of the

assessment can take up to months (e.g. the comprehensive nature of standardized assessments, lack of resources, contacting potential programs to refer) with a referral for services in the spring. Without major intervention during these months between fall and spring term, it is often found that student problem behaviors escalate and academic performance decline. It is unfortunate but not uncommon that students are not able to participate in the services recommended through the assessment during the school year that they were referred. This can be very discouraging for teachers who were hopeful in obtaining support for the student achieve positive change. The length of the assessment session is a noted hurdle in prevention programs in general.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the lengthy process itself may be especially discouraging for communities in which risks for behavioral problems are common, where it seems as if all students should receive some sort of intervention. In order to maximize students' participation in and benefit in the program, earlier detection of risks is also very important. Shorter assessments that are simpler to administer allows for greater student participation. The ease of administering the assessment would ideally allow everyone in a classroom or school to be assessed. In doing so, it serves as an instrument that screens risks for behavioral and emotional problems, while also detecting students who show early signs of these risks. Early detection is a core principle of RALLY, and is underscored in Chapter 2.

It is no surprise then that an assessment in a prevention program needs to be simple so that it could be administered quickly and easily. A challenge for RALLY was to build an assessment that could be completed within one hour during the school day. Furthermore, school psychologists and social workers who typically administer the assessment are scarce, primarily because the school is unable to hire enough people with

training expertise. For a school with many students that show emerging risks for behavioral and emotional problems, there simply would not be enough psychologists or social workers to go around. Thus, another aim included the designing of an assessment that could be easily administered by trained professionals (i.e. practitioners), and not necessarily school psychologists or social workers. This would free up the time for the school psychologists or social workers to address student issues that would require more extensive assessments.

Finally, assessments are only useful when it is easily analyzed and interpretable. This is especially salient when referrals are needed as soon as possible so that the student can take part in the services available. Another consideration in the design to simply and expedite the assessment process included uniting assessment results to appropriate services by developing a set of recommendations based on the interpretation of the outcomes, and to deliver the reports to the school staff (e.g. teachers), school prevention team (e.g. practitioners), and students. An assessment that produced results that are easily understood is crucial for collaborative and joint decision making in the referrals. A simpler assessment can help meet these expectations for ease of referrals.

#### *Theoretical Considerations in using a Holistic Assessment*

While prevention programs are often theoretically driven in its approach to intervention, the assessments themselves may not always be as rigorously informed by theory. With the aim to understand the overall well being of the child in a holistic assessment, we strongly felt that a developmental approach needed to guide the design of the assessments. Please review Chapter 2, where we have elaborated on our developmental approach to preventive practice. For now, remember that this

developmental approach is based in constructivist social-cognitive theory and assumes that all children are active meaning makers able to (re) invent their worlds. This is in turn, contributes to the other factors, that we regard as important in understand the whole of the child. We describe further, why we believe the developmental approach is the underlying component to other factors in the operating model. This operating model which includes these factors is illustrated in the Figure 1.

RALLY draws upon the social-cognitive development given the research evidence for links between social-cognitive development with risks, resiliency, and social relationships. For instance, social-cognitive skills as measured by moral reasoning are negatively associated with externalizing behavioral problems in childhood, adolescents, and early adulthood.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, self concept development was related to more symptoms of depression and suicidality.<sup>11</sup> It is notable that social-cognitive development is related to resiliency as well. It has been found that individuals in the latter stages of social cognitive development hold greater empathic attitudes. With good reason, researchers have called for harnessing children's resiliency to ameliorate risks for behavioral and emotional problems in children.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, resiliency is considered a normative process<sup>13</sup> and its development seems to conceptually co-occur with social-cognitive development.<sup>14</sup>

We include relationships as an important factor to assess in a holistic approach. While common sense suggests that the way children think about themselves and their way of relating to others have an impact on the behaviors and academic performance of adolescents, there is also strong research support that draws links between social context with behavioral and academic outcomes. For instance, adolescents may show greater

aggressive tendencies, which may be linked to nonresponsive parenting or low social cohesion in the community<sup>15</sup> whereas supportive relationships enhance the adolescents' development.<sup>16</sup> This research is in line with the ecological perspective and shows that relationships need to be understood within the various contexts which they reside in. A holistic assessment that identifies the context and its role in the relationship provides great clarity to our understanding of the individual student's experience.

#### *Measurement Rationale*

It is important to note that the measures chosen here are not fixed since this is our first step towards instituting a set of ideal measures that best captures the overall well-being of the individual youth. In fact, the measures that we present here should be considered as an example set that reflects an overarching holistic framework; that is, one that measures the various factors important in capturing the "whole" of the individual youth, which include development, resiliency, risks, and relationships. Those who develop a prevention program are encouraged to consider measures that cover these components while also addressing the pertinent issues salient to their specific prevention program.

In being thoughtful about what should be included in this present pilot study, a number of decisions were made to create a holistic assessment that would work best for the RALLY program in particular. Our choice for assessments included a combination of widely used and validated measures with measures we have designed specifically for RALLY. The inclusion of the validated measures ensured that our measurements were as accurate and useful as could be given that they were rigorously developed with empirical research. However, it was also important for us that we collected elaborated reports of

RALLY student experiences to understand their particular opinions and insights. The next chapter describes each of the specific measurements we used in a school that implemented a RALLY program in greater detail.

### *Conclusion*

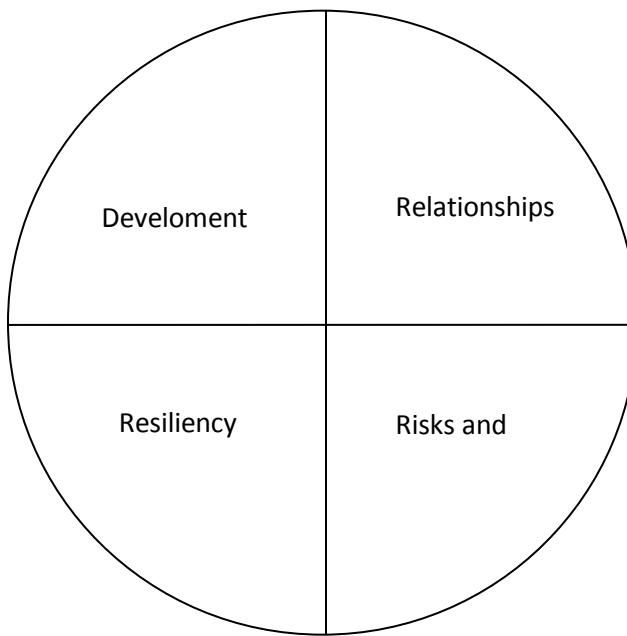
In sum, we in RALLY developed an assessment model that represents our conceptual approach and measures. We feel that a holistic assessment strikes the right balance in maintaining both a theoretically driven but logically sound approach in the RALLY approach. The holistic assessment best captures the main factors that help us to understand adolescent problems so that a proper referral can be made (i.e. development, resiliency, relationships, risks), while also ensuring that the process itself is as efficient as possible. The approach is not rigid; as illustrated with the assessment for RALLY, measures may need to be developed to address the particular needs of the students.

### *Summary*

- The long length of an assessment during the school year slows down the process of helping the student to obtain appropriate services (early detection as a mean to serve all students' needs).
- A holistic assessment is based in that what is assessed makes sense based on the research data (e.g. relationships and resiliency are associated). In that way, standardized norms could be developed for the particular set used in a program.
- An assessment for youth should be theoretically driven by a developmental theory that best explains the resiliencies and risks of central concern to the prevention program.

- In general, a holistic assessment considers the overall well being of the adolescent, and seeks to understand the adolescent's development and resiliency in relation to social relationships/context and risks.
- The measures used in an assessment should match up with the different aspects of the adolescent that one is looking to change in a program (e.g. development, resiliency, relationships, and risks).
- A holistic assessment can be easily administered by youth works, such as practitioners.
- That is, the assessment findings should point out what type of service is needed. This link should be understandable to all those who are working with the student.
- Those who administer the assessment should show and translate the assessment findings to the referral, in order to explain why the service is needed.

Figure 1 Four Factors in a Holistic Assessment



*Notes*

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