

5-2019

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Increasing Middle School Students' Awareness of Becoming Involved in Risk Taking Behaviors

Leslie Chavez

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

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Introduction

Given that adolescence is a time of many changes, many teenagers are becoming involved in risk taking behaviors. Adolescents tend to be more susceptible to these risks in comparison to others in the lifespan due to their autonomy from parents, peer pressure, and trying to find their identities. Teenagers may not understand why risky behaviors are attractive to adolescents and how to manage the urge to engage in them. To address the teenagers lack of awareness, I will create two 30 minute session curriculum about the importance of avoiding risk taking behaviors among students at Chalone Peaks Middle School in King City, California.

Need Statement

Adolescence is a time of many physical or psychological changes. Often times, these changes also lead to risky-taking behaviors. During this stage of transition, adolescents may begin to feel a sense of autonomy eventually leading to poor decision making. Some of these risk taking behaviors can be due to trying to find their identity or simply because of peer pressure.

It is during adolescence that individuals are developing a sense of identity. According to Steinberg (2014), developing a sense of identity is the extent to which a person feels secure of who they are and what they are becoming. Because they are trying to figure out who they are, adolescents may become involved in risk taking behaviors and make poor decisions such as consuming drugs or unsafe sexual practices. Adolescents who have not formed an identity and who come from a minority background are more prone to be involved in a risky behaviors (Cummings, 1995) . A perfect example of a risky behavior in this case is a street gang. The main factor of why minority adolescents may make the decision to join a gang is because they seek the attention and look for the sense of belonging to a certain group (Howell, 1998). When

adolescents face struggles at home such as money issues or poor parental support, they may feel that the only comfort they can acquire is from a gang.

According to Cummings (1995), there are three barriers to identity, (1) Conflicting values (2) Few adult role models and (3) Lack of family guidance. Adolescents may experience conflicting values if their family continues to follow their own cultural norms. Because each culture has their unique way of doing things, children may even face a culture clash which in turn can lead to the negative behaviors becoming part of their identity. In addition, criticism from people around them such as peers, family, and professionals is another factor that adolescents cope with, and usually that criticism can ultimately affect their self-esteem and lead to identity confusion. The lack of family guidance for minority adolescents can also lead to a form of identity confusion since they may not feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts or feelings with relatives. As a result, teenagers may seek the guidance from the wrong people leading them to be more susceptible to risk taking behaviors. Overall, it is important to address identity formation as a time of many changes which can lead an adolescent to do some unacceptable things, but with the proper support and guidance those risk taking behaviors can be avoided (Cummings, 1995).

In conjunction with identity, peer pressure can certainly be an important factor of why children become involved in risk taking behaviors. Peer group interactions certainly increase during adolescence as teenagers begin to want to spend more time with their chosen friends and classmates and become more involved intimately, in regards to thoughts and feelings with peers (Cummings, 1995). There are two types of peer groups: one that can positively influence a child and one that can negatively influence a child. If the adolescent surrounds him or herself with children who are motivated in academics or children whose day-to-day behavior is about how

much they enjoy school, then teenagers of this peer group are more likely to be successful as they are motivated by one another to continue doing well. A negative peer group relates to children who do not show interest in academics and are less motivated. Children who associate themselves with negative peer influences are more prone to becoming involved in risk taking behaviors as they lack adult guidance and look at peers as a support system.

Considering that adolescents are in a transition stage, it is likely that they are not aware of how risk taking decisions can be detrimental to their future. To address the importance of this issue and to avoid such behavior, I have decided to create two, 30- minute sessions about the importance of avoiding being involved in risk taking behaviors that will be addresses to low academic students at Chalone Peaks Middle School in King City, California.

Theory Application

Developmentally, adolescents are in what Erikson would call Identity and Role Confusion stage where students often times explore their independence and start to develop a sense of self. That includes questions such as “Who am I?” Because adolescents are still looking for their sense of self, they are more prone to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., drugs, alcohol, unprotected sex). Since adolescents are still trying to figure out who they are, it is particularly important to provide extra support and/or guidance so they can learn to express themselves. As stated by Steinberg, “...we should not view the achievement of a sense of identity in adolescence as a final state, but rather as a step on a long route toward the establishment of a mature self” (Steinberg, 2014). In addition, Piaget’s cognitive theory states that adolescents are in the Formal Operational Stage. In this stage, Piaget believes that adolescents begin to use abstract reasoning, but may not be able to fully engage in deductive reasoning (Steinberg, 2014). In other words, adolescents are able to think in abstract ways such as manipulate ideas in their head or solve

word problems. Therefore, I am creating a series of lessons to help the early and middle adolescents understand how their involvement in risky behaviors may affect their future.

Consideration of Diversity

My project will be conducted at Chalone Peaks Middle Schools' after school Gear-up program. According to the Schools Accountability Report Card (SARC; 2018), Chalone Peaks Middle School is .1% African American, .4% American Indian, .8% Asian, .6% Filipino, 91.7% Hispanic or Latino, 5.6% White and .7% Two or More Races. In addition, 90.6% are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The expectation is that majority of the participants are going to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, considering that Gear-up is a program intended to provide after school support for those students who are not doing well academically. As a result, it is possible that my participants do not have enough parental involvement which is causing them to follow the path of risky behaviors. Because I will be conducting my lesson in English, participants are expected to be English proficient to be able to follow written and verbal instructions. The intended participants are middle school students leading up to high school, so it is not likely that younger children and adults will benefit from it.

Learning Outcomes

I intend to provide 2, 30 minute lessons to middle school students who are part of the gear up program and are doing low academically

By the end of the project, participants will be able to:

Identify the outcomes of societal stigma against teens that lead to risky behaviors.

Describe one peer influence of participating in risky behaviors.

Identify one component of good decision making.

Methods

Day 1.

First, I introduced myself and told the class why I was there. I then displayed my presentation. I began my presentation by including an ice breaker, known as a mindful challenge, using a spinning wheel from <https://wheeldecide.com/index.php?c1=Thank+someone&c2=Compliment+someone&c3=Greet+someone&c4=Help+someone&c5=Show+appreciation+towards+someone&t=Mindful+challenge&time=5>. Refer to Table 1. Upon completion of a spinning wheel, we quickly jumped into the presentation. First, I asked the students “Why do you think society hates teens?” I Allowed 2 minutes for a student to come up to the board and write down answers. Upon answering, I acknowledged the response and added on to the answers. I then moved on to explaining what factors may influence a child's decision to engage in risky behaviors such as peer influences. Peer influences was explained in a few slides. One slide discussed positive peer influences and the other discussed negative peer influences. Refer to Appendix C. Discussion on why adolescents become involved in risky behaviors was also discussed. Concluded my day by asking students how many of them would Bungee Jump off the “AJ Hackett Macau Tower” a 764 feet fall ranking the world's tallest bungee jump. Waited for a show of hands. End of day 1.

Day 2.

Began the day by showing 2 short YouTube videos. One covered where we left off the day prior, which is of the AJ Hackett Macau tower bungee jump from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHZ4FCshZtU>. Explained how jumping of this building might seem exciting and how some of you are willing to engage in such risky behavior, but then showed them video number 2 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHZ4FCshZtU> which shows an adolescent being pushed off a bridge by her friend. When the video was over, I made

the connection to risky behaviors by addressing the lifelong impact the girl had when she was pushed off bridge by her “friend”. Before continuing to the next slide, I had students break up into 4 groups of 5 . I then distributed the decision making chart worksheet to each group. Refer to table 2. Students from each group were given a scenario of a problem an adolescent may face. The students were asked to fill out the worksheet stating two choices the adolescent had and what route was considered safe. I provided an example to assure the students understood what was expected of them. Refer to appendix F. Before the day ended, to show my appreciation for their cooperation and participation, I provided treats with a hidden message such as lemonheads with a message stating “Stop. Think. Don’t be a Lemonhead”. End of Day 2.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was that participants would be able to identify the societal stigma against teens that lead to risky behaviors. Right after my introduction, I had participants break up into four groups of five participants per person. I began lecture with the question “Why does society hate teens?” Students were then prompted to write their opinions on the board. To my surprise, participants were able to come up with 3 reasons. See table 3. The discussion followed and asserted their answers which included: 1. Trouble makers 2. Don’t Follow Rules 3. Don’t make right decisions or choices. This learning outcome was not met due to the students already having prior knowledge on the subject.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would be able to describe one peer influence to risky behavior. For discussion, I showed two videos on examples of risky behaviors. Video 1 showed people jumping off the Macau Tower and video 2 showed a teenage girl being pushed off a bridge by her friend. On the lecture of peer influences I covered how one can be a part of several negative risky behaviors. Participants were active listeners throughout lecture, so when I

asked participants to provide examples of what a negative and positive peer influence included students were able to state one to two examples per group. Since each group was able to provide at least one example of a negative peer influence to risky behavior, I believe that learning outcome 2 was met. Some of the things they mentioned were for negative peer influence are doing drugs, cursing out a teacher, drinking alcohol, ditching, and bullying. For positive peer influences they were joining a sport, studying with friends, and staying after school to study. Refer to table 4.

Learning outcome 3, was that participants would be able to identify one component of good decision making. Based on my lecture, I provided participants with several scenarios of adolescents who would potentially engage in risky behaviors and had the participants fill out a decision making chart which asked them to include a positive choice, negative choices, and a possible outcome for both choices. All answers were good and some of them were the same, which determined that learning outcome 3 was met. Refer to table 5.

Discussion

I believe this project was partially successful. Two out of three learning outcomes were met. The participants were engaged in the lecture topic and seemed to learn a lot from the presentation as well as the interactive activities. Considering that students are in what Erickson calls the identity and role confusion stage, I believe this project helped them understand that to be a better self, they do not need negative peer influences. In other words, being able to incorporate Piaget's Formal Operational Stage, such as using abstract reasoning, to know what is good and bad is what adolescents need to do to avoid negative peer influences. I think that the discussion on how negative peer influences can cause a lifetime harmful effect covered on day 2 was the most successful and had the largest impact as measured by the decision making chart.

The decision making chart also connects to Piaget's Formal Operational Stage, where adolescents can begin to have an increase in logic and gain the ability to use deductive reasoning. Since their cognitive abilities are advancing, the participants became engaged and were demonstrating abstract thinking as they completed their decision making chart. The participants were able to state how the consequences of engaging in a risky behavior can have a negative impact in their lives, an abstract reasoning skill.

In terms of diversity, my content was intended for middle adolescents; therefore, my content may not be as effective to older adolescents. The student population that participated in my project were teens who already are involved in risky behaviors, which is how they were placed in this particular type of class. From a cultural perspective, it is possible that the majority of students come from low-income families which may lead students to be suffering from the lack of parental guidance due to their parents working long hours. It is possible that parents of my population may have not negatively influenced their children to be involved in risky behaviors, but because of the lack of time spent with them adolescents may be seeking to find their identity with peers, which in turn leads them to fall into the wrong paths.

If I had to do this presentation over again, first, I would not have spent so much time on introductions and would have gone straight to the presentation. I feel like the first 10 minutes of the class time were wasted because I was trying to get situated to the unfamiliar classroom. Second, I would make sure my site is organized in terms of setting up an adequate time for me. Third, I would make a request to have more than 30 minutes in two consecutive days. I felt that with this short amount of time, I was forced to rush through the lecture. In sum, even if I rushed through some of the areas, the students were engaged and I know they are walking away with a

lot more useful knowledge of the consequences of being engaged in risky behaviors than what they thought they knew.

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Appendix A

Why do people hate teens?

- Society has no space for them.
- WHY?
 - 1. Prone to more risk taking behaviors
 - 2. Poor decision making
 - 3. Rebellious personality
 - 4. Disrespectful or Rude

CAN WE STOP WORRYING ABOUT MILLENNIALS YET?

BY MATT BORS

CAN WE? MAYBE? I KNOW IT'S VERY SCARY TO BE REMINDED THAT YOU ARE AGING, BUT OLDER PEOPLE CAN PROBABLY STOP PRETENDING YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DESTROY THE PLANET. WE GOT THIS. (BY THE WAY, THANKS FOR LEAVING IT IN TIP-TOP SHAPE.)

THOSE OF US BORN BETWEEN 1980 AND 2000 ARE NOT NEARLY AS GOD-AWFUL AS THE WRITERS WHO CONSTANTLY PROFILE OUR TECH-ADDLED, BE-HIPSTERED PEOPLE WOULD HAVE YOU BELIEVE.



THE ONLY THING MORE LAZY THAN A 20-SOMETHING IS THE GENERATIONAL SLANDER THAT TAKES PLACE ANEW EVERY TWO DECADES OR SO TO FILL COLUMN INCHES AND CREATE A NEW DEMOGRAPHIC TO MARKET TO.

Appendix B

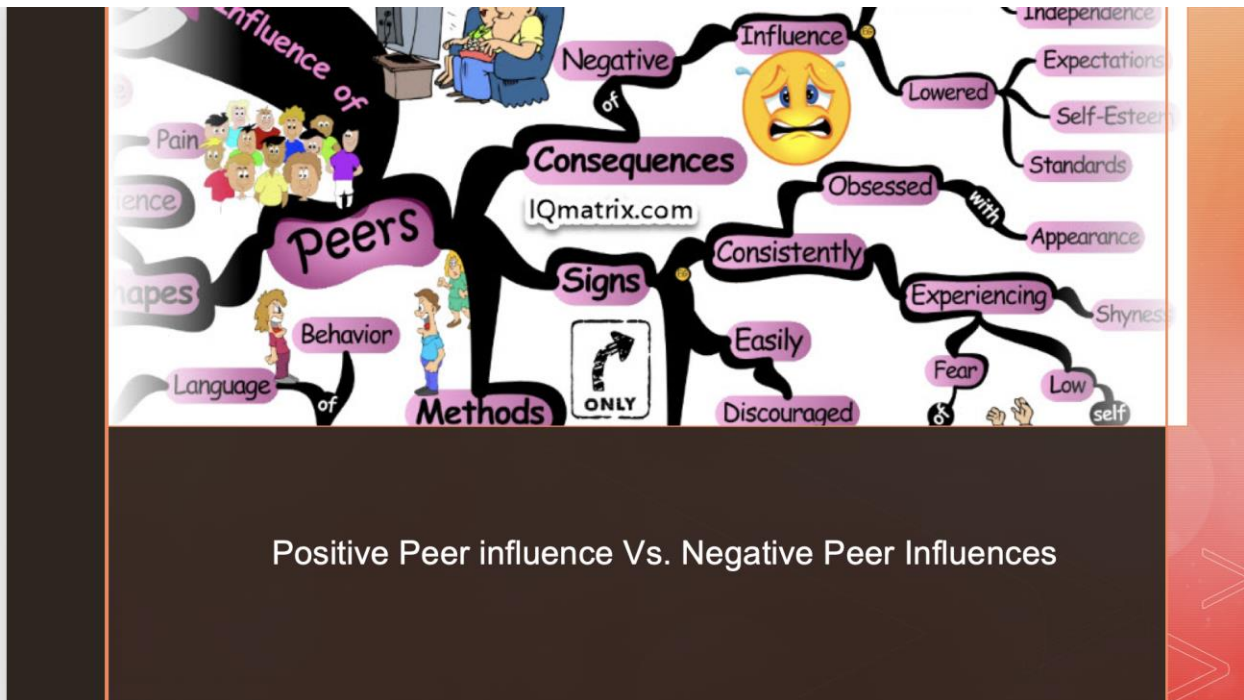
Risk Taking Behaviors

By: Leslie Chavez

Peer Pressure

- What is peer pressure?
- Peer pressure is the amount of influence people your age have on you





Appendix C

Positive Peer Influence

- Can be described as an influence to do what is RIGHT
- Examples:
 - Studying
 - Volunteering
 - Befriending someone
 - Community service
 - Joining a sport



▸ Negative Peer Influence

- Often **DANGEROUS** against school rules, home rules, and personal values

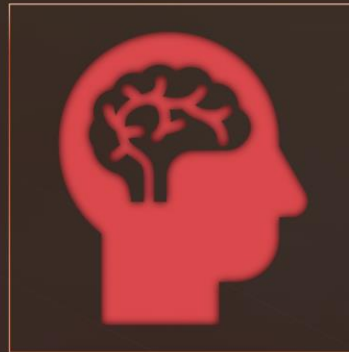


- Examples:
 - Skipping school
 - Vandalizing
 - Smoking
 - Sneaking out of the house
 - Bullying
 - Disrespecting authority
 - Sex

Appendix D

Brain Development

- Adolescents brains are not fully developed.



Ticket out the door

- Would you bungee jump off a 764 feet building?



Appendix E

DAY 2

Would you bungee jump?

AJ Hackett Macau tower



Appendix F

When peers become an issue



Scenario Example



Table 1

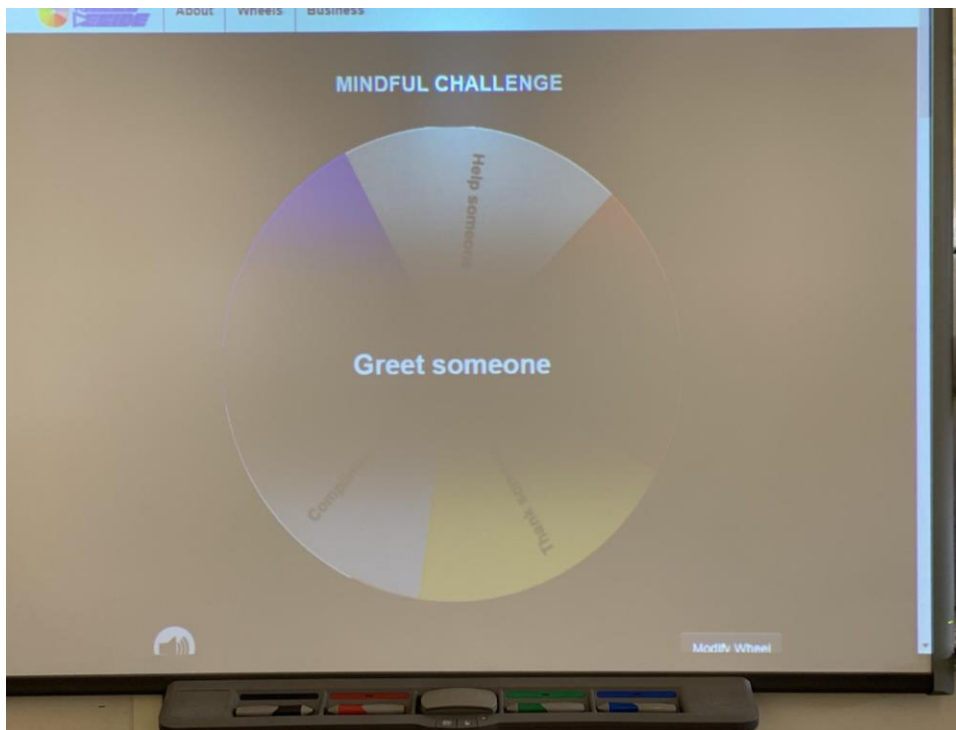
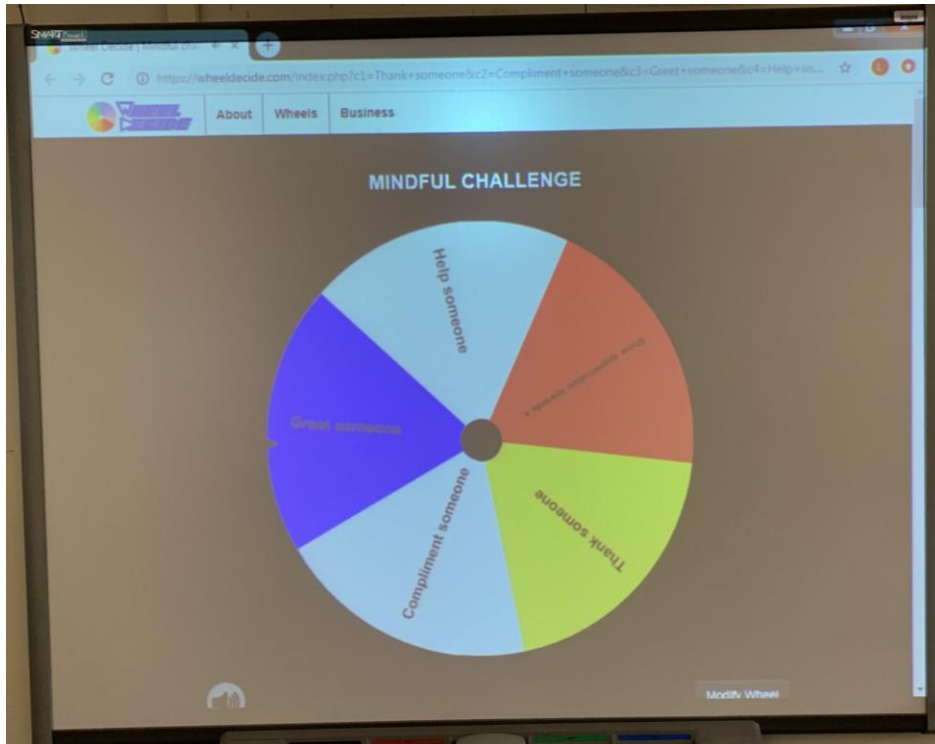


Table 2

Decision Making Chart

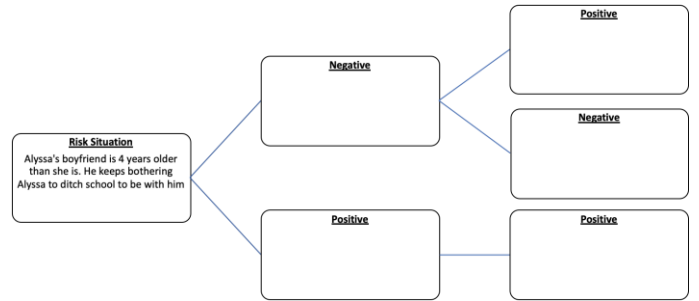
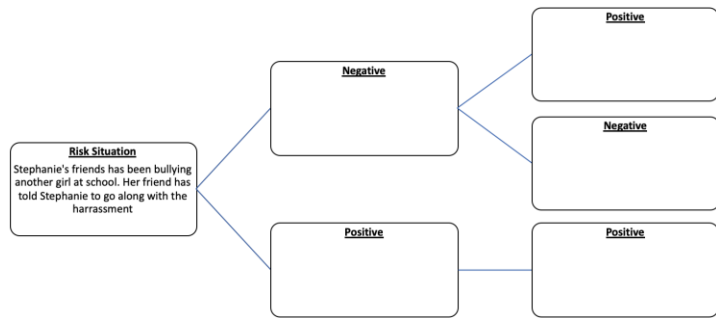
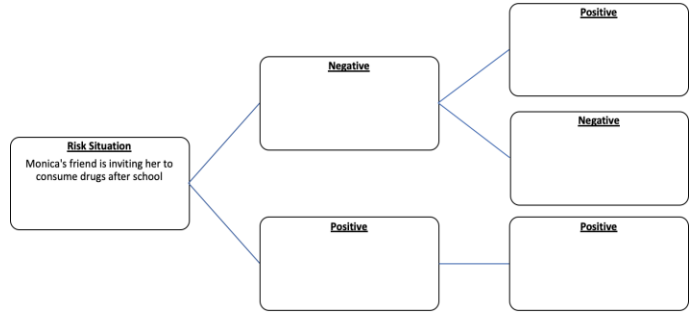
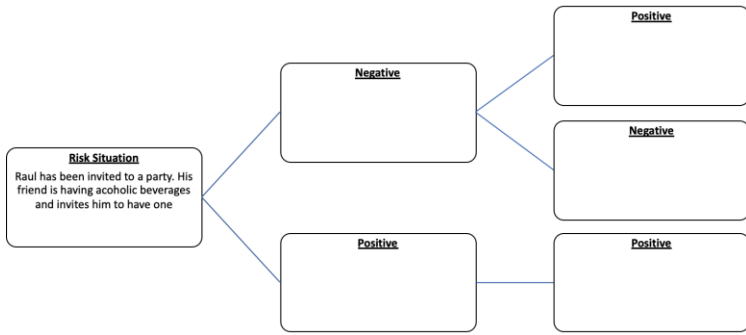


Table 3

LO- 1

Students already knew:
1. Trouble makers
2. Don't follow rules
3. Don't Make right decisions/ choices

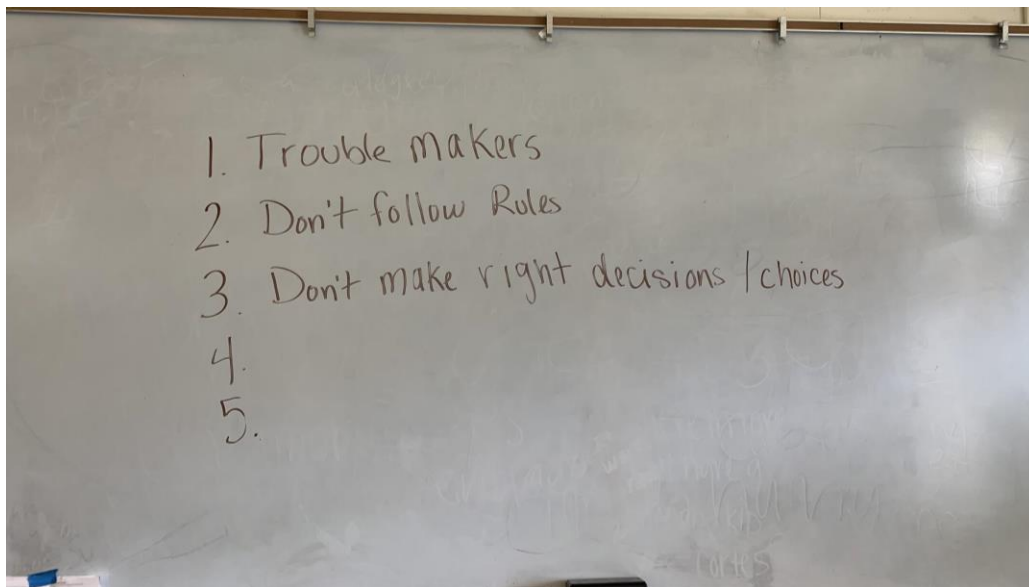


Table 4

LO-2

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Positive	Joining a sport	Study with my friends	Playing soccer with my friends	Staying after school to study, helping my neighbor, playing basketball
Negative	Doing drugs	Cursing at a teacher	Drinking alcohol	Smoking weed, ditching, telling teacher off, bullying

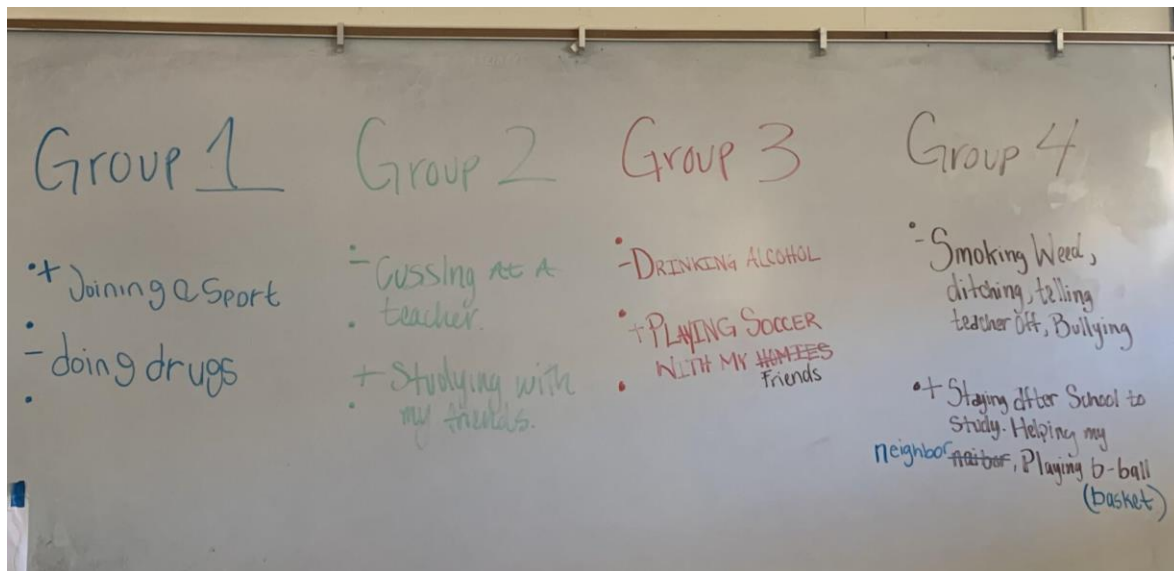


Table 5

Decision Making Chart Outcomes

Groups	Scenario	Negative	Negative	Positive	Positive
Group #1	Stephanie's friend has been bullying another girl at school. Her friend has told Stephanie to go along with the harassment	Bullies too	Gets suspended	She tells teacher and doesn't hang out with them	Makes new friends
Group #2		She starts to bully the innocent girl	Gets in a fight and gets beat up	Makes new friends instead	New friends are positive influences and play a sport
Group #3		She goes along with the harassment	Girl being bullied stops coming to school	Talks her friend into leaving her along	Befriends the girl who was bullied
Group #4		She bullies	She gets into a lot of trouble	She stops being friends with the bullies	She befriends the girl being bullied
Group #1	Raul has been invited to a party. His friend is having alcoholic beverages and invites him to have one	Drinks some	Drinks too many and parents never let him out again	Enjoys Party	Makes memories
Group #2		He drinks	Says no	Gets drunk	He said no
Group #3		Gets drunk	Results in	Says no	Has fun at

			overdose of alcohol		party with other friends
Group #4		Raul gets drunk	He could not get home and his parents are worried	No to alcohol or drugs	Learned to say no
Group #1	Alyssa's boyfriend is 4 years older than she is. He keeps bothering Alyssa to ditch school to be with him	Ditches school and gets in a car accident	Doesn't listen to him	She doesn't die	Stays in school and doesn't miss work
Group #2		Ditches and gets pregnant	Is a young mom and baby doesn't have a dad	Breaks up with him	Focuses on school
Group #3		She ditches and runs away with him	Has a baby at 13 years old	Breaks up with him for being a negative influence	Does better in school
Group #4		She ditches	Parents file a police report because she never came home	Break-up with him	Focuses on school
Group #1	Monica's friend is inviting her to consume drugs after school	Gets high and then gets caught by police	Goes to jail for having drugs	Says no thank you and goes home	Does homework early
Group #2		She is a negative influence. They get high and get	Goes to jail (maybe)	Says no and tells parents	Parents call school to tell and Monica doesn't do drugs again.

		caught			
Group #3		Consumes drugs	Maybe overdoses	Kindly regrets invitation and attends after school program instead	Got her work done
Group #4		Takes drugs with friend		No to drugs and no to negative influences	Happier and successful life