

What Works Clearinghouse



Building Decision Skills

Program description

Building Decision Skills aims to raise middle and high school students' awareness of ethics, help them gain practical experience in developing core values, and give them practical strategies for dealing with ethical dilemmas. *Building Decision Skills* consists of 10 lessons that can fill two consecutive weeks of daily lessons or be drawn out over a longer period. Using readings, handouts,

and overheads, the teacher covers key concepts. Students are encouraged to think about the key concepts through small-group activities, class discussions, and homework assignments. The program also includes schoolwide components (such as group discussions, seminars, and assemblies). And it can be combined with service learning.

Research

One study of *Building Decision Skills* met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards with reservations. This study included nearly 300 high school students attending a

large suburban high school in St. Louis, Missouri, and examined results on students' knowledge, attitudes, and values.¹

Effectiveness

Building Decision Skills, combined with service learning, was found to have potentially positive effects on students' knowledge, attitudes, and values.

	<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Knowledge, attitudes, and values</i>	<i>Academic achievement</i>
Rating of effectiveness	Not reported	Potentially positive effects	Not reported
Improvement index²	Not reported	Average: +14 percentile points Range: +3 to +30 percentile points	Not reported

1. The evidence presented in this report is based on the available research. Findings and conclusions may change as new research becomes available.
 2. These numbers show the average and the range of improvement indices, for all findings across the study.

Additional program information

Developer and contact

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Scope of use

Building Decision Skills was first published in 1995. Information is not available on the number or demographics of students, schools, or districts using the intervention. The curriculum may have changed since the study was conducted. The WWC recommends asking the developer for information about the most current version of this curriculum and taking into account that student demographics and school context may affect outcomes.

Teaching

The program has packets that the teacher can choose to present over a short period or to spread out over time. Students participate through collaborative activities, group problem-solving, communication, and independent thinking. The curriculum includes a teacher's guide, lesson plans, readings, overheads, and handouts. The key concepts and core activities are designed as single class-period lessons, but many lessons can be extended beyond one class period. Alternatively, the first five lessons can be taught at one time and the last five later.

The Institute for Global Ethics offers one-day or two-day on-site professional development workshops conducted by a

Global Ethics staff trainer. In addition, the Institute offers on-site seminars and assemblies for students participating in the *Building Decision Skills* program. Lectures, group discussions, and small-group activities are used with topical sessions that include moral awareness, values definition, ethical analysis, and dilemma resolution.

In the study reviewed here, the *Building Decision Skills* curriculum was implemented in an elective service-learning class. The service-learning activities that were integrated into the curriculum involved working off campus two days a week and working on campus two days a week on such projects as providing companionship for residents of a retirement home or running a recycling program in the school.

Cost

The *Building Decision Skills* curriculum costs \$100 and includes the teacher's guide, lesson plans with handouts and activity materials, a paperback book *How Good People Make Choices*, and an audiocassette tape with an overview of the program. The Institute for Global Ethics offers a one-day Ethical Fitness® seminar (\$2,500) for school faculties on the conceptual framework for the *Building Decision Skills* curriculum. Three-day train-the-trainer seminars (\$12,600) are available for schools and school districts to certify trainers to teach the Ethical Fitness® seminar.

Research

One study (Leming, 2001) reviewed by the WWC investigated the effects of the *Building Decision Skills* curriculum combined with service learning. This study was a quasi-experimental design that met WWC evidence standards with reservations. It included 283 twelfth-grade students from a large school in Missouri. It compared outcomes for students participating in an elective course that combined the *Building Decision Skills* curriculum

and service learning with outcomes for students in English literature classes that did not use a character education curriculum or offer service-learning opportunities. The study focused on *Building Decision Skills* as implemented in classrooms rather than as a schoolwide intervention.

Effectiveness Findings

The WWC review of character education addresses student outcomes in three domains: behavior; knowledge, attitudes, and values; and academic achievement.

Knowledge, attitudes, and values. Leming reported findings for seven measures for this outcome domain: ethical awareness, ethical responsibility, ethical perspective, self-esteem, social responsibility (general), social responsibility (school), and anticipated future community participation. Leming reported statistically significant differences favoring the *Building Decision Skills* group on four student outcomes (ethical awareness, ethical responsibility, ethical perspective, and social responsibility-school), and one of these outcomes, ethical perspective, was found to be statistically significant (as calculated by the WWC).³ However, Leming found no statistically significant impact on self-esteem, social responsi-

The WWC found *Building Decision Skills* to have potentially positive effects on knowledge, attitudes, and values

Improvement index

For each outcome domain, the WWC computed an improvement index based on the average effect size (see the [Technical Details of WWC-Conducted Computations](#)). The improvement index represents the difference between the percentile rank of the average student in the intervention condition versus the percentile rank of the average student in the comparison condition. Unlike the rating of effectiveness, the improvement index is entirely based on the size of the effect, regardless of the statistical significance of the effect, study design, or analysis. The improvement index can take on values between -50 and +50, with positive numbers denoting favorable results. The average improvement index for the knowledge, attitudes, and values domain in the study reviewed is +14 percentile points, with a range of +3 to +30 percentile points across findings.

bility (general), and anticipated future community participation. The average effect across all seven outcomes was large enough to be considered substantively important, using WWC criteria, although it was not statistically significant.

Rating of effectiveness

The WWC rates interventions as positive, potentially positive, mixed, no discernible effects, potentially negative, or negative. The rating of effectiveness takes into account four factors: the quality of the research design, the statistical significance of the findings (as calculated by the WWC), the size of the difference between participants in the intervention and the comparison conditions, and the consistency in findings across studies (see the [WWC Intervention Rating Scheme](#)).

Summary

The WWC reviewed one study on *Building Decision Skills* combined with service learning. One outcome in the knowledge, attitudes, and values domain was found to be statistically significant (as calculated by the WWC). When the WWC aggregated all seven outcomes the average effect size was substantively important (greater than 0.25). So the WWC rated the program as having potentially positive effects in the knowledge, attitudes, and values domain. Character education, an evolving field, is beginning to establish a research base. The evidence presented in this report is limited and may change as new research emerges.

3. The level of statistical significance was calculated by the WWC and where necessary, corrects for clustering within classrooms or schools, and for multiple comparisons. For an explanation see the [WWC Tutorial on Mismatch](#). See the [Technical Details of WWC-Conducted Computations](#) for the formulas the WWC used to calculate statistical significance. In the case of the *Building Decision Skills* report, corrections for clustering and multiple comparisons were needed.

References **Met WWC evidence standards with reservations**

Leming, J. S. (2001). Integrating a structured ethical reflection curriculum into high school community service experiences:

Impact on students' socio-moral development. *Adolescence*, 36(141), 33–45.

For more information about specific studies and WWC calculations, please see the [WWC Building Decision Skills Technical Appendices](#).