

What do we learn when developmental prevention programs do not work? Lessons from the Impact and Process Evaluation of the ZARPAR Program

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Since the 1990s, developmental prevention has emerged as one of the most effective approaches to preventing delinquency and antisocial behavior, with several prevention programs being developed and consistently evaluated as promising or effective in enhancing children's adjustment and reducing maladaptive outcomes. Nevertheless, there are also data revealing that not all developmental prevention programs achieve their intended outcomes, with evidence reporting null or negative effects of such programs, and suggesting that the overwhelmingly positive message about developmental prevention programs should not hide a series of problems faced by these interventions. However, despite this growing body of literature, a tendency to avoid disseminating null or negative effects persists, largely due to concerns that such findings may threaten program sustainability or reduce public and governmental funding. Thus, based on the lessons learned from the evaluation of "ZARPAR" – Educational Program for Cognitive and Behavioral Development, a universal psychoeducational intervention targeting elementary-school children, whose results proved to be predominantly null or negative, this paper seeks to challenge this logic and argues that such findings constitute a critical, yet underutilized, source of knowledge for improving prevention strategies and informing responsible decision-making, particularly in contexts of limited resources. To conduct the impact evaluation, a randomized controlled trial design, combining multi-method and multi-informant approaches, was used. Furthermore, this study included the development of a process evaluation to understand how well the program was delivered and received in the specific intervention context. To do so, different data-gathering strategies were used, including document analysis, interviews, and focus groups with key informants. By integrating impact and process evaluation findings, ultimately, this paper seeks to discuss potential explanatory mechanisms underlying these results, highlighting how rigorous and systematic evaluations can support program refinement, prevent unintended harm, and contribute to a more transparent and evidence-based prevention.



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