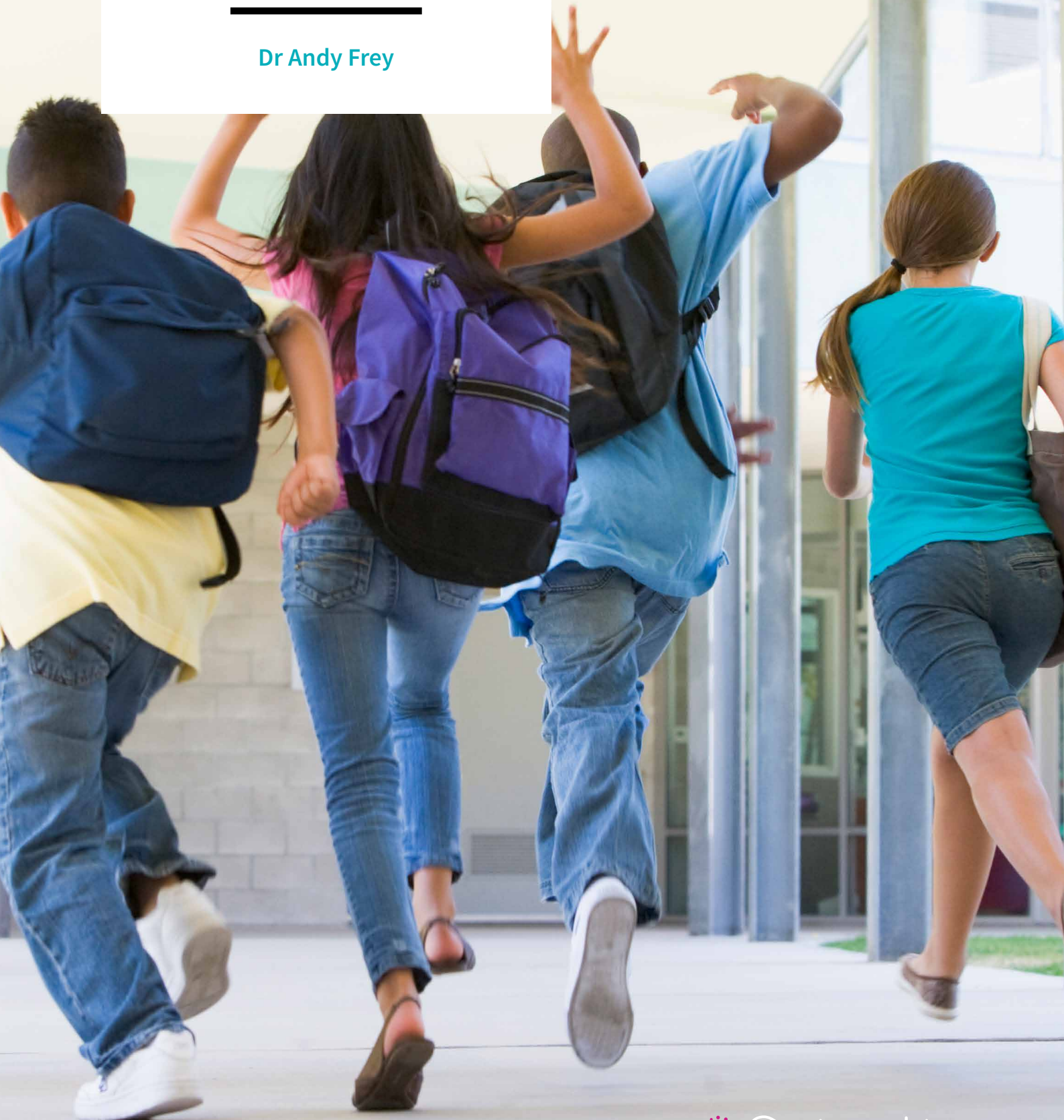


# Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviours

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Dr Andy Frey



# SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

Children with disruptive behaviours require intensive support in school. **Dr Andy Frey**, professor at the University of Louisville, has been developing and evaluating interventions that could help these children to begin their school years positively and successfully. The First Step Next and homeBase intervention programs involve a collaboration between parents and teachers to support children with problematic behavioural patterns achieve their potential.

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## Teaching Children with Challenging Behaviour

Challenging behaviour generally refers to a broad range of issues that children can present with in school, including disruptiveness, aggression, self-harm, difficulty communicating with others, or other disruptive tendencies. Some students with behavioural problems are affected by mental health conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder, anxiety problems, or initial signs of Autism.

For children with challenging behavioural patterns, learning within school environments can be a difficult and problematic experience. It is hence important for teachers and other education specialists

to take the needs of these children into consideration, implementing support programs and initiatives to help them achieve better results and develop a positive attitude towards academic environments.

This is often particularly useful for children in pre-school and primary school, when they are starting to develop their first attitudes towards life and academic environments. Early interventions can help to reduce the risks of these students taking destructive pathways or developing severe psychiatric disorders later in life, while also reducing potentially stressful situations for their school teachers and peers.

Dr Andy Frey has worked as a school social worker, behavioural coach, and mental health consultant for over two decades,

trying to devise interventions that could help children with challenging behaviours to perform better in school. In recent years, he focused on developing and evaluating two interventions called First Step Next and homeBase, rooted in the idea that efforts to improve children's challenging behaviour should be collaborative – with behavioural coaches, teachers and parents working together towards positive change.

'My work aims to help young students with challenging behaviours get off to the best start possible in school,' says Dr Frey. 'This is done by developing and evaluating interventions that focus not only on working with young children directly, but also by working with parents and teachers – who control the environments that are so influential in shaping student behaviour. We also investigate methods to help peers support the disruptive students.'

## First Step to Success Early Intervention Program

The First Step to Success program is a collaborative home-school intervention that lasts approximately 3 months, aimed at teaching young children with challenging behaviour the skills that could encourage their academic success.



## ‘My work aims to help young students with challenging behaviours get off to the best start possible in school.’



Dr Hill Walker of the University of Oregon first introduced this intervention through a model development grant from the US Office of Special Education that ran from 1992 to 1996. The original version of the First Step program is made up of four main components. Firstly, children are offered one-to-one sessions with a behavioural coach, who trains them in skills associated with school success. They are meanwhile provided with ongoing opportunities and feedback, aimed at facilitating their mastery of these skills in both classroom and playground contexts.

The third component of the intervention involves regular communication with the family, so that caregivers can encourage the good job the child is doing at school. Finally, there is a home component, for which parents are taught to support their children's success in school within their household. The behavioural coach initiates the student's acquisition of skills, encouraging his or her success in school, and is then gradually replaced in this work by the student's teacher, who is still however supported by the coach throughout the three-month period.

Thus, the program was designed to provide substantial support upon initial implementation, then gradually become less intensive, reaching completion once the student's academic and social performance improves. Several research studies assessed the effectiveness of the First Step intervention in small and large trials, finding that it was consistently successful in improving children's school behaviour and performance.

The program has been applied successfully with approximately 2,000 students having challenging behaviour in pre-school and primary grades. It has also been translated into Spanish and adopted in schools in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, Norway, and Turkey.

### The First Step Program Revisited

After its initial implementations, First Step has undergone a number of different adaptations and innovations. Over the past few years, Dr Frey and his colleagues, including Dr Hill Walker and other original authors, revisited the First Step intervention, improving some of its aspects so as to be easier to implement by school personnel.

In their feedback, parents and teachers who had participated in the intervention said they felt it required a lot of time and effort, while coaches felt they needed more information about students' behavioural characteristics and skills, in order to tailor the intervention to their individual needs. This and other feedback was used by Dr Walker and his colleagues to update the program over a one-year period and make it easier to implement.

They preserved the core elements of the original First Step program, including direct instruction in school success skills, group and individual contingencies, peer and home support, reward activities, and positive feedback for good behaviour. Many of the original procedures were also left the same, while some were either revisited or only slightly updated. Overall, First Step Next, the updated version of the original intervention, was designed to be effective, less complex and easier to implement.

First Step Next can be applied to students in pre-kindergarten (4 years old) through grade 2 (age 7–8), while the original program covered grades K-3 (age 8–9 years) and relied on a separate preschool version for children in earlier developmental stages. The new version of the program also includes a series of pre-implementation screening procedures, such as an assessment of the students' relevant characteristics and of their classroom climate, which can help to tailor the program to each child's individual needs.



First Step Next also features new competencies to guide the intervention, called the Super Student Skills. These are social-emotional and academic enabling skills that should be enhanced by the intervention, including things such as 'follow directions', 'ask for attention the right way', 'do your best work', and more. It also features new tasks, games and home-school activities, which should re-enforce the skills that the children are trying to acquire.

Some of the parent involvement activities included in the original First Step intervention were retained, while the home component, an initiative that consisted of six home visits by the behavioural coach, was eliminated from First Step Next, and developed by Dr Frey and his colleagues as a stand-alone intervention. Parents are hence no longer asked to teach the Super Student Skills to their children at home, a task that becomes the sole responsibility of the coach and teachers at school.

Parents participate in the revisited version of the program through phone calls or meetings with the coach and daily 'check-in' notes, as well as rewarding children for positive behaviour and supporting them in their school progress.

#### **HomeBase: Involving Parents in Children's Behaviour at School**

homeBase started off as part of the First Step program, but it is now treated as a separate intervention that could supplement either First Step Next or other school-based interventions. homeBase is an entirely family-based intervention designed to support parents in trying to improve the challenging behaviour of their children. It includes up to six, hour-long sessions with a behavioural coach intended to increase parents' motivation and improve their parenting practices.

During home visits by behavioural coaches, parents are encouraged to gain awareness of their parenting practices and re-visit some of them, in order to foster positive change in their children that could also improve their overall behaviour in school. Parents are asked to replicate some of the principles of parenting that encourage positive behaviour central to good performance in school. This includes establishing clear expectations for their children in terms of behaviour and school performance, as well as defining the consequences or rewards of negative versus positive behaviour. An innovative aspect of the new standalone homeBase intervention is that the 60-minute sessions with parents are developed around a counselling approach called Motivational Interviewing.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a particular style of communication centred around the language of change, designed to strengthen personal motivation and commitment towards a particular goal. MI does this by exploring a person's reasons for wanting to change with support, compassion and acceptance. The main idea behind this practice is that talking about change and arguing for it tend to accelerate the process, while arguing against it tends to prevent change from happening.

So far, assessment studies have suggested that the process Dr Frey and colleagues have developed, the Motivational Interviewing Training and Assessment System (MITAS) can be a very effective method in preparing behavioural coaches to use MI skilfully with parents, ultimately leading to tangible improvements in parent and child behaviour.

#### **The Future of homeBase and First Step Next**

Dr Frey and his colleagues are currently assessing the effectiveness of the First Step Next and homeBase interventions, as well as the perceptions of participating teachers and parents. They are carrying out research to evaluate the effectiveness of these two interventions when delivered alone and in combination, which should help us to understand the most effective strategies to tackle students' behavioural problems in school.

Results that have been collected so far have been promising, with teachers reporting improvements in students who participated in First Step Next and homeBase intervention programs compared to others who didn't. Overall, First Step Next and homeBase resulted in greater academic engagement compared to students who did not receive either intervention, and those who received the First Step Next and homeBase interventions have experienced the greatest improvements. Dr Frey and his team are now working on a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development application that would allow them to conduct a further efficacy trial for the homeBase intervention with parents of preschool children.

In the future, they also plan to develop a universal First Step Next variation, called First Step Next – For All, that would allow for a similarly structured intervention that is applied with all students in a classroom setting simultaneously in hopes of preventing challenging behaviour from occurring and developing into a characteristic behaviour pattern.

Dr Frey says, 'we will also continue promoting our Motivational Interviewing Training and Assessment System, as we believe MI is a promising skill set to address a wide range of challenges in implementing effective evidence-based practices in the context of school-based intervention research and practice.'



# Meet the researcher

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Dr Andy Frey is a Professor at the University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work. After completing a BA at Rollins College in Florida, a Masters in Social Work at the University of Michigan, and a PhD at the University of Denver in Colorado, Dr Frey has worked as a social worker, behavioural coach, and consultant in a number of academic settings. He has worked with children for over 25 years and has been a mental health consultant for Jefferson County Public Schools' early childhood program for the past 16 years. Dr Frey's research and teaching has focused on school-based mental health and social work services, such as the First Step Next intervention, home-based approaches, and motivational interviewing within school settings. His work is currently aimed at comparing the effectiveness and impact of interventions for children with disruptive behaviour. Over the course of his career, Dr Frey has received a number of awards, including the Gary Lee Shaffer Award (2010) from the School Social Work Association of America, the Outstanding Scholarship, Research, and Creative Activity in Social Sciences Award (2015) from the University of Louisville and the School of Social Work Scholar Award from the University of Denver (2015).

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## FUNDING

Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education  
R324A150179 and R324A150221

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