

## **Episode 26 - Dr. Jeffrey Jenson: Using Principles of Prevention Science to Promote Healthy Youth Development: The Denver Youth Empowerment Projects**

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University of Buffalo School of Social Work is celebrating 75 years of transforming lives and communities. We would like to invite you to be part of the celebration. Please visit our website [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu) to see a full list of events marking our seventy fifth year leading up to the gala celebration I'm your host Adjoa Robinson. April marked the 10 year anniversary of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre the deadliest in U.S. high school history. That tragedy and other more recent acts of violence has fueled a national conversation about and call to action to prevent violence and aggression among American youth. The aetiology prevention and treatment of childhood and adolescence problem behaviors such as aggression bullying and violence have been the focus of our guests life's work. Dr. Jeffrey Jensen is the Philip D and Eleanor G win professor for Children and Youth at Risk and the associate dean for research in the Graduate School of Social Work University of Denver. He received the University of Denver a distinguished scholar award in 2003 and the university lecturer Award in 2007. And Erin Rosen lecturer award from the Society for social work and research in 2009. Dr. Jensen is a member of several editorial boards and is editor in chief of the journal Social Work Research.

[00:02:08] He has published three books and numerous articles on the topic of adolescent problem behavior. His book social policy for Children and Youth at Risk and Resilience perspective with Mark Frazier was a 2008 recipient of the Society for Research on adolescent social policy Award for Best edited book. Jensen is currently principal investigator of the empowering disadvantaged and High Risk Youth Project an investigation aimed at improving academic and behavioral outcomes among youth residing in three Denver public housing communities. In today's podcast Professor Jensen discusses this investigation and others as examples of efficacious approaches to promoting healthy youth development and advances in the field of prevention science. Our interviewer Susan Green a clinical associate professor at UB's Graduate School of Social Work spoke with Dr Jensen by telephone. I would like to introduce you to our podcast audience. This is Dr. Jeff Jensen. Jeff thank you very much for being with us today. You're welcome. It's good to be here Jeff. Certainly I've read many of your contributions to the field. So it truly is an honor to have the opportunity to speak with you. And I'd like for you if you would to start out with telling our audience what brought you to the place of having Risk and Resilience be your field of study. Well several things so I think the first to the field of prevention when we talk about preventing an adolescent problem behaviors things like delinquency drug use aggression violence those kinds of behaviors.

[00:04:00] We've had a relatively long history in the United States of trying to combat these problems by long I mean you know dating back to the 1960s or so and we experienced We've tried several different things to to prevent these problems. And until the 1980s really worked very successfully. Now we tried programs such as skeered street programs in the 1960s in which we try to inform kids about the risks of proper behavior and actually kind of scare them away from these behaviors which are just preventing and preventing information. The kids will really find a lot of those strategies work weren't successful so I think there was in the 1980s really that the field of prevention got a big boost from some public health. And this is kind of where I got through the

deleted and so to speak as a doctoral student at the time at the University of Washington working with Hawkins and Catalano and social development research and what we and others started to do that is to look more at the risk and protective factors associated with public behaviors like delinquency school dropout and borrowing from public health. This notion that prevention really needed to do was to target these risky protective traits rather than just talk about problems with kids and you try to modify reduce risk and increase protective buffer kids from getting into trouble. So that was an time as a doctoral student in the field was embracing this particularly in the mid 80s in the late 1980s it became a very practical model to deliver prevention services. So there actually is a risk in resilience model. Is that what you're saying. Yes there is. And let me say a little bit about what that looks like. The notion is that we can identify and we have empirically identified certain characteristics and traits that place kids at risk for problem behaviors.

[00:06:24] And at the same time we've also been able to identify characteristics and traits that tend to detect or puffer kids from for risk. And the parallels to public health comes from problems such as Let's take heart disease poor example. I asked you to identify the respect for heart disease you would quickly rattle off things like well being overweight having a poor diet lack of exercise those are two things. Well similarly in the field of prevention and resilience models to identify these these risks and risk factors for problem behavior come about various levels of influence so we can look at risk of an individual level at a family level at a pure level and a community level for example. So if we took families for a minute we looked at what would be common respect for trauma behavior in the context of a family. One could look at things like her would identify with things like health active parents are parenting how they supervisor kids how they can be either how well they involve the kids and how closely they are bonded and thinking and then going further to programs is to take you know infuse prevention programs with with knowledge of them spruiks of these types of risks. So we know that the poor parental monitoring is a significant risk factor for delinquency clients and that it makes sense and programs to teach parents how to effectively supervise and monitor their kids. So let's get to one example. How that played out and it can pull out of two different levels of course you can work with peers of the respecters in the context of community such as a well-organized community and what are available supports.

[00:08:30] You know how can we turn our attention to intervention efforts to reduce those risks. Now at the same time the more recent years there's been interest also and the whole concept of protection of resilience. You know they're kind of closely related again. Do you think protective factors as these characteristics that would help kids succeed in the face of high levels of risk slow growing up on everything and certainly won't be irrespective of behavior for example but yet kids in many cases since they were pets themselves to mentor or help secure the community. And we know that these kids can become successful and avoid problems. And this is very much in line with this whole idea of results. It's interesting that you make the comment in these last several years we've been paying a little bit more attention certainly to protection and resilience. So would you say that this is relatively a newer field as you stated back in the 80s when you were a doctoral student is when really the have it be policy makers or academia started to pay attention to hey look let's embrace something different here. Yeah I think so. Prior that private prevention had really been done kind of piecemeal there's no overarching model for it programs were tried and they weren't and and there was really no undergirding kind of radical or practical framework for it so I do think those small risk and resilience risk detection has really afford to feel about it. And it has a punitive appeal to the practitioners and the policy makers. You know one could welcome.

[00:10:31] Unlike some for perhaps sophisticated theoretical models about behavior of risk and resilience comes a certain pressure on people. I think it makes sense to start early intervention efforts and to target these factors means risk factors and protective traits very early on based on your examples. I think what I'm hearing you say is that it's not just within the individual themselves but important for us to be looking at all facets at all levels. That being the community the family

policy etc.. Yeah absolutely. To do that and some of our work here in Denver practically we have a project currently for public housing communities for example to deliver afterschool interventions to kids. And they are certainly living in very high risk neighborhoods and high rates of crime and drug use. And so we really work in this project for example individual level skills and you know try to keep them off track in terms of school performance. But at the same time we're we're we're taking more broader based efforts and the community really were more in line with traditional kind of social work community organizing evolving parents collaborators in the community and different social services and schools sponsoring events trying to assist the older kids with employment skills and jobs and the like. So yes it's you know sometimes some focus perhaps too much on the individual and not enough on the community level with some of these rules. But that's certainly a good point. So has there been receptivity from the community in regards to you being involved or your projects being out there amongst the community. Yeah you know we do have very good smart are pretty good participation rates among the parents of children that we are serving.

[00:12:36] And it is case this project is called The Bridge Project. It's through funding from various sources including a grant from the Office of Minority hope you know we buy nearly Tooter tutoring and mentoring to kids you know also skill training component to to keep kids on track. Hopefully at school and reception is great. You know the unique part of this particular project has taken over an apartment building. Each of the four public housing sites were so we become very well trusted and recognized. And parents parents turn to us quite readily that are good. So you have an actual presence right in the community they know who you are you're not living but you're actually there day in and day out if you will. We do. We are with the staff were there every day five days a week. Programming is going on is never very visible. Just like the neighborhood of my son. I'm also aware that Jeff that you are involved in schools bullying prevention projects also. Can you talk a bit about that. Yeah. We've we've just finished recently actually a three year study here in Denver public schools. This was a group randomized trial actually of intervention called youth matters youth matters. This is a structured curriculum. And to put them in fourth and fifth grades in for attaining Denver public schools. And we had a control group of schools of 13 schools who didn't participate in the project. And we've been collecting data courses both for both groups of kids for the past three years.

[00:14:29] The curriculum really wasn't enhanced handsome skills in young children floating fifth graders particularly in regard to recognizing signs for aggression and bullying and teaching kids skills about what to do. Situations involving bullying and even more importantly really the curriculum tried to adapt changing norms in the classroom about bullying behaviors you know noting that these behaviors were inappropriate. And how can we change that more collectively as a group or as a classroom. Now we implemented this that these 14 schools lots of challenges here that we we did find positive results with the end to two years and timelines this year. Now before the reductions significant differences between experimental control groups that you know reports of bullies victimization favoring or experimental groups it appears that we will have a positive effect to reducing the rates of victimization that kids are experiencing from other people. Can I ask you to even flush out a bit more. You've made comments about changing norms and certainly kind of the macro level of things. What specifically are the things that you're teaching students in regards to coping skills or management skills cetera. Yeah well they would be things like the playground for example there is a prime location. So he would do a lot of role playing a lot of teaching and coaching about situations but arise on the playground where kids were sitting there kicking and pushing or all of them calling those kinds of things. So that's kind of one example of the skill side of the more classroom level kinds of content we did well. So lots of different approaches really are there.

[00:16:36] The kids were encouraged to at the end of each of these training modules we had kids were encouraged to develop skits and play some kind of school events about them had something to

do with bullying or aggression and they would put these on. We had some very very fun and interesting rap sessions around the idea that bullying was something you didn't want in their classroom or their school. So that was the latter was really more at trying to change kind of broader norms about boys to send messages. Because of that this could be pretty hurtful behavior it all the time and some kids experience repeated bullying and sex can be pretty pretty devastating in some cases. And the wisdom of obviously yourself and other folks on the project starting at the fourth and fifth grade. Obviously that was probably informed by something you know was bullying is one of those behaviors that tends to kind of peek out around the early middle school or junior high school years. So we knew that bullying prior studies and other people's work that shareholders. The United States knew that bullying really took the time time to the older stages of elementary school. So it made sense for us to want to fourth and fifth grade for just practical in Colorado. Back to School Evans at first grade and kids go into middle schools with scripts. We wanted to impact and intervene prior to those middle school years. I've taught see risk and resilience course for several years and the long and short is that students at our school school social work have studied several issues topics that being things like drug use school dropout delinquency and it appeared that many of the risk and protective factors were similar if not the same for many of those problem areas. Can you speak to that it shows up in your experience. Yes that is.

[00:18:44] That is very much my experience in the literature and research really bears that out in all that many of these these we just talked earlier about parental supervision and proud Balma while these these behaviors. Those sorts of risk factors might be related to many problems that people experience. School dropout or delinquency drug use in some cases violence. But yeah there's a great commonality in these factors which also tends to improve the utility of evening approach. You know in school settings per sample or an students whereby you can look at carbon inspectors to come across these problems. So you can kind of be helpful in terms of interventions and you know that back. Kids kids who you know certainly were part of your program through the kind of overlapping problems like mental health and delinquency treatment center for instance. Then there's a great overlap there when you do look at the causal factors or are there key practice policy and or research questions that you believe need to be addressed in the future. Yeah I mean I think there's a number of things course. One is just really getting getting prevention on the top burners some speak you know to get prevention funding and what are the levels that we've been a country that has tended to have more remedial kind of approach and in one social policy in general and to the kids of youth in particular. So we've reported a lot of responses historically to systems like juvenile justice and welfare and far fewer resources. And yet you don't see a little bits of change occurring there certainly with the with the greater emphasis on health promotion.

[00:20:49] We've seen the current efforts to help perhaps getting a little bit easier. Prevention is slow. There's been some on some good cost. Two studies done to mention in recent years. STEPHEN SMITH Washington Public Policy Institute and showing that a lot of these prevention programs that are delivered in schools in particular are been effective and are quote effective in terms of services compared to the current situation there in tens of thousands punches. Yeah well that's that's that's rather than some movement there. And it's something that social workers should be thinking about doing a lot more. There's there's a donors from that develops research for example which is composed of the public health people are so sure that people will buy larger it's been dominated by other. I think that this whole idea of reducing risk increasing protection and to build resilience is very compatible with not only prevention but social work. And I think we can have a larger presence there in the field but that's a tall order but I think it's increased with those people in social work doing more of this kind of work in parallel to that is kind of a need to develop a really good intervention research skills in small work for students who are going to school going onto to work and that is very still still a lot in terms of just the number of people are engaged in interventions. Let's turn to our other issues as well. Perhaps a little smaller scale but all all important you know we want to have prevention. Feel has been trying to do is really kind of organize itself.

It's all kind of prevention science.

[00:23:13] Is one thing the field has been trying to do is to encourage communities to schools and families and that's the context and to really use prevention approaches are continuing to be effective. It's very much in line with the whole movement of evidence based practice and disseminating to fact this community with these executions programs are Ehab instead of you know kind of bonds reinventing the wheel so to speak and learning something new. Take a look at how one can quote community can choose and adopt an effective prevention program. So that's a whole other area. Certainly lots of people have been working diligently and instill a challenge through the field. There's been several developments there that are interesting and always thought through a period of time and Prevention now for the last probably 10 to 15 years especially where there have been a number of what we could call efficacy trials done studies of different curricula occurring on a test of the youth matters in public schools. We know from news trials that there are programs that work of the tutelary we followed kids and have seen reductions in behavior prevention behavior that the test now in many ways is to translate these results that we could pay in these trials and these efficacy channels. It means mutations to a broader base. There are a couple of systems out how really that more what you might call community prevention system by investigators are trying to bring to the community the tools to make choices about the prevention programs that they choose to implement the best known work.

[00:25:12] Today it is called communities of care developed by the kids and anda group in Washington which they bring not only the knowledge of prevention but a system of prevention through community involvement. City council people ministers teachers parents and such to go through a process that uses its risk and protection model in which they identify and their communities where the most common problems are the most significant risk factors we kids face for example and go out of a structured process to get to the point of selecting programs that they think will be most likely to protect kids in their communities. So that's kind of an example of trying to bring them to scale. There are a lot of talk these days of bringing prevention to scale so how can we bring effective programs locally bring them to a larger have a larger impact so to speak. So that's also going to be challenging. You know there's there's other areas in credential to the attention of programs that need attention. One is the whole issue of cultural adaptation and appropriateness of the prevention programs that are out there. And the question is you know but to what degree is programs be adapted through different cultural groups for boys visit schools or homes in some of those issues that have yet to really be cracked. There is certainly curricula are modified and adapted for local characteristics and conditions and needs and so forth. It's been largely kind of a piecemeal approach to this point. That's an area that has no future challenge or could challenge those two kids. If someone were a practitioner in the community or a community organizer. Is there a spot that they could find this stuff like where do they go. You know that's a good point.

[00:27:33] There are a couple of places there some which I think are clearing houses where these effective programs are identified and some of this comes from the whole question of the evidence based practice. Well for example the University of Colorado at Boulder. There is a center run by Dale Elliott called the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence here. Their shop has with some funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have identified a number of what they call blueprint and purpose term if you will. And that's one place where people go there's a Web site. There is the up details these programs and gives its practitioners a pretty good sense of what they are. Other federal sources who have some have some registry there's a registry of programs so that Fortman Sampson actually said it was 150 programs. Well you're meaning to the most of world and think there's others. Well there's other sources from searchers going to be a little bit more systematic reviews and work Campbell. CORCORAN discussions that going on to identify efficacious interventions. Threats were warm search focused in terms of how much disseminated there would be in other sites for people who this has been extremely helpful and very informational.

Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to share with the audience. Well I think encourage people to take a quick look at really the tremendous potential of getting involved in prevention work in general. It's a saying a minute or two. So we now really know now that these programs can be effective that group programs can be effective while implemented programs.

[00:29:46] And if anything I would like to see more social workers engaged in both the practice side to implementing prevention programs and doing the research side as well. So I think that in many ways due to the whole risk and resilience model is very compatible with basic social practice and a lot of ways. Well it's kind of like what the cause of a particular problem or to what the strengths people now are in relation to their lives and their problems. So to protect the troops and in many ways of thinking it's a model that could be used a little more closely particularly in prevention. But even beyond that. So that would be an opening I would look towards. I think that you know it's encouraging to see the field come so far. Thank you. It's very exciting and speak to people often ask them about their experiences in school one woman in terms of the kinds of prevention activities or programs that come. And you know you can go up to date myself but going back to the 60s when I was in public school prevention and in my case from pretty much everyone. I was my gym teacher walking here. You know what. One day things or putting on really the film about a drunk driving range in and the next day and putting the boot before actuality thrill ride. Oh I do. And of course the guys would be separated from the girls. Of course not. Courtesy of the bleachers or something when we'd walk out and know the very thing you'd tear apart the interest the whole thing would be to do that.

[00:31:57] So anyway we've come a long way from forbad where we're now really engaging kids in these programs you know very interactive situations in the whole context has just changed dramatically since it's much more real and effective than. Well it's a whole attitude and perceptual change and that part is very exciting right. It really is giving us some tools to be able to help people to do that if they choose to. That's a good way and think we're not doing that much better than we did in the past Kripik teachers and social workers and others to come out and really really truly want for the kids. So the students that the programs are are in that regard very very promising and you know the lessons sometimes are learned slowly we've we've had even not too long ago you know began their program in the country was implemented it has been implemented very we're really widening of drug abuse resistance education. And you probably recall there were some studies of that eventually to actually drop out pretty widespread across the country. That showed that the yes. Well we couldn't get to the horse was running so to speak. The word people like the program but we didn't know it. You're not going to put dollars into it was not effective right. Really cool program under underlay some interviews doesn't seem hard to work with. Portable taping what you know what to do. And you know that we know a whole lot more now than we did when we were in school so true. That's the beautiful thing. It really is. But it's really quite an evolution really happens. People start say well this was an honor and a privilege for me.

[00:34:03] So thank you so much and thanks for making yourself available to us. Oh sure. You've been listening to Dr. Jeff Jensen discuss advances in prevention science and the promotion of healthy development among high risk youth. Join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community with more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). At UB we are living proof that social work makes the difference in people's lives.