DBT in Schools: Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (DBT STEPS–A)
By: James J. Mazza, Elizabeth T. Dexter–Mazza, Alec L. Miller, Jill H. Rathus, & Heather E. Murphy (Guilford Press, New York, 2016)
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Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) was originally developed by Marsha Linehan as a treatment for high-risk suicidal individuals with complex disorders who had difficulties with emotional regulation. A number of studies, including an increasing number of randomized control trials, have supported the use of DBT as an evidence–based intervention with adults and, increasingly, adolescents. In this new book, part of the popular Practical Intervention in the Schools Series published by Guilford Press, authors James J. Mazza, Elizabeth Dexter–Mazza, Alec Miller, Jill Rathus, and Heather Murphy have done something no one else has done before: created a curriculum based on DBT skills that can be used with a broad range of middle and high school students. The authors include both school and clinical psychologists (the lead author is a Past–President of AAS), each of whom brings a wealth of specialized knowledge and practical experience with DBT in diverse settings.

As Marsha Linehan notes in her foreword to the book, the authors have put together a unique social–emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that expands the reach and implementation of DBT skills to the population of adolescents in educational settings. The curriculum is designed to assist middle and high school students to develop and practice emotion management skills, interpersonal effectiveness skills, and decision–making skills – the same DBT skills training that have been used so successfully with adolescents exhibiting a variety of problems related to emotional dysregulation. What is particularly unique about this book, however, is that the curriculum it provides can be used for all students in a given adolescent population, including but not limited to adolescents who are already experiencing problems with regulating their emotions. The book is therefore useful as a universal “upstream” approach designed to prevent problems as well as treat them. As the authors note in their preface, “our purpose in creating DBT STEPS–A was to provide a meaningful set of skills for emotional management, relationship building, and decision making that adolescents could acquire and apply to navigating the emotionally difficult situations and stressors that accompany adolescence” (p. xi). In this reviewer’s opinion, they have succeeded admirably in their goal.

The book is divided up into two parts. Part I provides an overview of DBT STEPS–A, including chapters on what the curriculum is and what it involves (chapter 1), practical implementation issues in schools (chapter 2), and teaching it to challenging students (chapter 3). Part II, which makes up the large portion of the book, provides detailed instructor information, 30 lesson plans, and various “tests” that can be presented to students (i.e., Distress Tolerance Test; Emotion Regulation Test; Interpersonal Effectiveness Test). The lesson plans are especially valuable, as they clearly and comprehensively present information in a highly structured and user–friendly format. Each lesson plan includes a brief summary, a listing of main points to be covered during the lesson, materials to be used in the lesson, the preparation required for the lesson, a lesson overview and timeline, and a detailed lesson plan. Because of the high degree of structure provided, the curriculum can be taught and presented to middle and high school students in general education classes (Tier 1) taught by any general education teacher with at least a minimal degree of mental health awareness, and ideally by teachers who have some background in adolescent mental health (e.g., health teachers). The authors recommend that school–based mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, and/or social workers) provide the curriculum for students who are considered at–risk for mental health problems (Tier 2) or who are
currently exhibiting them (Tier 3), given their increased knowledge, experience, and skill working with this population.

In addition to allowing for teacher instruction and modeling, the 30 standardized lesson plans are structured to allow for peer support and coaching. The lessons are based on the four standard modules of DBT – Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, and Interpersonal Effectiveness. Each lesson is intended to be taught within a 50–minute period, allowing it to be easily integrated into a general education schedule. Although the curriculum is designed primarily as a universal strategy for all middle or high school students in a given population (Tier 1), the authors also provide supplemental strategies that build upon and enhance skills for at–risk students (Tier 2) and for students already exhibiting problems (Tier 3) within a multi–tier system of support model. As schools are the de–facto settings for most mental health services provided to adolescents, the use of evidence–based strategies such as DBT skills becomes even more critical, and this book fills an important need in that process.

In sum, this is an excellent resource for school personnel interested in providing a social–emotional learning (SEL) curriculum for students. As Marsha Linehan states in her foreword, “DBT STEPS–A offers a novel approach in targeting school–based systems rather than individuals, and provides an opportunity for all adolescents to develop and practice DBT skills” (p. x). DBT Skills in Schools: Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (DBT STEPS–A) should be required reading for anyone interested in adolescent mental health and is highly recommended.