

# Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices

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*Program developers or their agents provided the Model Program information below.*

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices (Al's Pals) is a resiliency-based, early childhood prevention curriculum and teacher training program that develops personal, social, and emotional skills in children 3 to 8 years old. It is designed to help children gain the skills to express feelings appropriately, relate to others, accept differences, use self-control, resolve conflicts peacefully, cope, and make safe and healthy choices. More than a curriculum, the Al's Pals approach can be used in all aspects of teaching and interacting with children, providing them with opportunities to practice and generalize their skills. In preparation for implementing the program, teachers receive training to create an environment of caring, cooperation, respect, responsibility, and healthy decisionmaking. A companion strengths-based parent education program builds positive relationships between parents and children and offers parents ways to reinforce Al's Pals concepts at home with their children.

## Program Background

Al's Pals was developed in 1993 in response to concerns about preschool children considered at risk. Such children displayed increasing levels of aggressive behavior, lacked social skills, and mimicked drug use and sexual activity behaviors in their play, increasing the future risk for new and escalating problem behaviors. Applying resiliency research to practice, the developers of Al's Pals created a comprehensive intervention that develops life skills in young children. The program was piloted for 5 years in a variety of settings across several States and revised using teacher feedback and classroom implementation observations conducted by the program developers. Al's Pals has been expanded to serve preschool through early elementary-aged children from all socioeconomic backgrounds successfully. A companion parent education program, *Here, Now and Down the Road . . . Tips for Loving Parents*, is available for facilitators to use with parent groups. It reinforces the concepts of Al's Pals and fosters positive parent-child relationships. Outcome studies are currently being conducted to assess the impact of the parent education component.



## **RECOGNITION**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Model Program

Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education: Promising Program

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): Effective Program

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## **INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE CLASSIFICATION (IOM)**

### **UNIVERSAL**

This program is effective with children 3 to 8 years old.

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## **INTERVENTION TYPE**

### **SCHOOL-BASED, COMMUNITY-BASED**

Al's Pals is a school-based intervention used in preschool, kindergarten through second grade, after-school, and childcare classrooms.

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## **CONTENT FOCUS**

**ALCOHOL, ILLEGAL DRUGS, ANTISOCIAL/AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE, VIOLENCE**

**ALCOHOL AND ILLEGAL DRUGS, ANTISOCIAL/DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR AND VIOLENCE**

The curriculum content focuses on identification and expression of feelings, brainstorming ideas, communication, positive relationships, safe and unsafe situations and substances, impulse control, and problem solving.

### **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

The program develops social-emotional and life skills in young children, intervening at the time when they are beginning to form behaviors and attitudes. The curriculum is formatted to strengthen specific resiliency traits in children.

### **Parent involvement as an adjunct strategy:**

Al's Pals includes a parent component. Letters from Al, the main puppet role model, are sent home regularly to inform parents about the life skills their children are learning and suggest activities parents can use to help their children practice and retain these skills. The curriculum also includes "Al-a-Grams"—school-to-home messages, delivered home by the children, that recognize positive behavior noted at school (e.g., caring about others' feelings or calming down).

## **INTERVENTIONS BY DOMAIN**

### **INDIVIDUAL**

- Life/social skills training
- Classroom curricula designed to address alcohol, tobacco, and drug-related behavior and use
- Social group work combined with social skills education

### **FAMILY**

- Parent education

### **PEER**

- Classroom/peer activities designed to develop expression, communication, positive relationships, and independent thinking

### **SCHOOL**

- Life skills training with role-play
  - Changes in teaching approaches and parent involvement
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## **KEY PROGRAM APPROACHES**

### **IN/AFTER-SCHOOL CURRICULA, BOOSTER SESSIONS, SKILL DEVELOPMENT, PARENT TRAINING**

#### **IN/AFTER-SCHOOL CURRICULA**

A trained classroom teacher delivers the 10- to 15-minute lessons twice a week. An original hand puppet, Al, is at the heart of the program, and serves as a positive role model. In addition to Al and puppet pals Ty and Keisha, the lessons engage children through a wide range of teaching tools, including guided creative play, brainstorming, original music, and movement to develop children's social-emotional competence and life skills. By modeling and reinforcing the concepts throughout the day, the teacher creates a caring, supportive environment, allowing children to generalize skills.

#### **BOOSTER SESSIONS**

A nine-lesson booster curriculum is used in second or third grade with children who have previously received the full program.

#### **SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

The program teaches children how to—

- Express feelings appropriately
- Use kind words
- Care about others
- Use self-control
- Think independently

- Accept differences
- Make friends
- Solve problems peacefully
- Cope
- Make safe and healthy choices
- Understand that tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs are not for children

## PARENT TRAINING

The parent education curriculum uses a strengths-based approach to help parents guide their children's resilient development. Trained parent educators use 13 experiential teaching modules with parent groups that address a broad range of parenting skills such as feelings, listening, meaningful involvement, brainstorming, high expectations, calming down, problem solving, creativity, etc. The program fosters positive parent-child relationships and enhances parents' skills in nurturing their children's positive social-emotional development.

## HOW IT WORKS

Al's Pals has 46 core lessons that capture real-life childhood experiences and provide opportunities for the children to acquire and practice social and emotional skills. Designed for preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade children, the lessons are delivered by a classroom teacher for 10 to 15 minutes twice a week. An original hand puppet named Al is at the heart of the program and serves as a positive role model. In addition to Al and puppet pals Ty and Keisha, children are engaged through a wide range of teaching tools including scripted puppeted discussions, guided creative play, original songs, posters, color photographs, message pads, and books.

Through the lessons, children learn and practice positive ways to express feelings, relate to others, communicate, differentiate between safe and unsafe substances and situations, brainstorm ideas, and solve problems. By reinforcing the Al's Pals concepts throughout the day, the teacher shapes a caring environment, encouraging independent thinking, use of self-control, healthy decisionmaking, and peaceful problem solving. A nine-lesson booster curriculum may be used during the second or third grade to reinforce skills learned through the core lessons.

Al's Pals includes a parent component. Letters from Al are sent home regularly to inform parents about the life skills their children are learning and suggest activities parents can use to help their children practice and retain these skills. The curriculum also includes "Al-a-Grams"—school-to-home messages, delivered home by the children, that recognize positive behavior noted at school (e.g., caring about others' feelings or calming down).

Complete lessons need to be delivered twice a week by a trained classroom teacher, in the sequence in which they are written. Teachers need to practice, reinforce, and model key Al's Pals concepts throughout the day, promoting a classroom environment of caring, cooperation, responsibility, and healthy decisionmaking. An implementation monitoring observation form is available to ensure fidelity.

Training is provided by Wingspan, LLC, which distributes Al's Pals nationwide. Two-day training is required for all classroom teachers who will deliver the program; booster and advanced training sessions also are available. Training is designed to—

- Increase understanding of how to apply the concepts of resiliency and protective factors to early childhood education
- Demonstrate effective use of the Al's Pals curriculum and build skills in using teaching approaches that support it

### **Materials**

Each classroom needs its own curriculum kit, contained within a puppet house, consisting of:

- Two manuals of 46 interactive lessons
- Three original puppets
- Easy-to-follow puppet scripts
- 12 original songs on cassette tapes or CD
- Oversized songbook
- 38 color photographs of real-life situations
- 14 sets of parent letters (also available in Spanish)
- Eight "Al-a-Grams" (bright, informative, school-to-home message pads, also available in Spanish)
- Calm down and problem-solving posters
- Two children's books

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## **OUTCOMES**

### **REDUCTIONS IN NEGATIVE ATTITUDES/BEHAVIORS, IMPROVEMENTS IN POSITIVE ATTITUDES/BEHAVIORS, OTHER TYPES OF OUTCOMES**

#### **REDUCTIONS IN NEGATIVE ATTITUDES/BEHAVIORS**

- Significant decreases in negative coping behaviors such as the use of physical or verbal aggression to solve problems
- Significant reductions in problem behaviors such as social withdrawal

#### **IMPROVEMENTS IN POSITIVE ATTITUDES/BEHAVIORS**

- Children who participate in Al's Pals are two to five times more likely to improve their use of positive social behaviors than children who have not participated. (Positive social behaviors include sharing, taking turns, using self-control, helping others, and using words to solve problems.)
- Children who participate in Al's Pals are 1.5 to 4 times more likely to improve their use of positive classroom coping skills than children who do not participate. (Positive classroom coping skills include talking about a problem with a friend or teacher or asking for help to solve a problem.)

## OTHER TYPES OF OUTCOMES

- Children who do not participate in Al's Pals are 2 to 6 times more likely to increase their use of antisocial and aggressive behaviors than children in Al's Pals. (Antisocial/aggressive behavior includes hitting, kicking, name-calling, bullying, and destroying others' belongings.)

### Benefits

- Strengthens children's social and life skills
  - Prevents increased aggressive/antisocial behavior that might otherwise occur
  - Helps children differentiate between safe and harmful substances and situations
  - Helps children manage their own behavior, freeing teachers to do more teaching
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## EVALUATION DESIGN

Since 1994, more than 20 studies of Al's Pals have been conducted in preschools, elementary schools, and child care centers. These studies used teacher ratings to measure the program's effectiveness at developing prosocial behaviors and preventing antisocial/aggressive behaviors among participating children.

- An experimental design was used to evaluate Al's Pals in a large Head Start program in a study involving 399 children. Seventeen classrooms were assigned randomly to receive the intervention, and 16 classrooms served as controls.
- A pre- and posttest comparison group design involving 446 children was used to evaluate the program's effectiveness in kindergarten and first- and second-grade classrooms.

Replication studies involving thousands of children have been conducted in preschool and early elementary settings in Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, and Virginia using comparison and one-group pre- and posttest designs.

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## DELIVERY SPECIFICATIONS

### 5–24 WEEKS

Forty-six lessons are delivered twice a week, for a total of 23 weeks. Lessons are 10 to 15 minutes each.

A nine-lesson booster curriculum is available for use with second or third grade for children who have completed the initial 46 lessons.

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## INTENDED SETTING

### RURAL, URBAN, SUBURBAN

Al's Pals has been implemented successfully in urban, rural, and suburban communities across the United States.

## **FIDELITY**

Components that must be included in order to achieve the same outcomes cited by the developer:

Complete lessons need to be delivered twice a week by a trained classroom teacher in the sequence in which they are written. The classroom teacher needs to practice, reinforce, and model key Al's Pals concepts throughout the day, promoting a classroom environment of caring, cooperation, respect, responsibility, and healthy decisionmaking.

Optional components or strategies and how they were determined to be optional:

Optional followup activities are provided for the teacher to use outside the lessons to reinforce the concepts taught.

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## **BARRIERS AND PROBLEMS**

All new teachers need to participate in Wingspan training before delivering the program. They attend training with other teachers whose schools are just beginning the program. It is helpful to schedule introductory teacher training to piggyback with booster training for experienced Al's Pals teachers.

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## **PERSONNEL**

FULL-TIME, PART-TIME, PAID, VOLUNTEER

Types of positions needed to implement this Model Program successfully:

Al's Pals is implemented by Wingspan-trained teachers in preschool, childcare, early elementary grades, and after-school classrooms. Classroom instructional assistants also need to be trained to deliver the program. Since the program enhances existing capacity by being delivered by the trained classroom teacher, no additional staff needs to be hired. The parent education program is implemented by facilitators who have been trained in its use.

Typical personnel problems encountered by users when implementing this Model Program and potential solutions:

All new teachers and assistants need to be trained to deliver the program. These new staff members attend the same introductory training as other teachers whose classrooms are just beginning to implement the program.

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## **EDUCATION**

SPECIAL CERTIFICATION

Education/qualifications of the personnel needed to implement this Model Program successfully:

Two-day training is required for all classroom teachers and instructional assistants who will deliver the program and for all parent educators who deliver the parent training. Materials are available only to those who complete the training.

## PERSONNEL TRAINING

Required personnel training, including the type, location, length, and any other requirements:

The 2-day interactive teacher training is designed to—

- Increase understanding of how to apply the concepts of resiliency and protective factors to early childhood education
- Build teachers' skills to use the Al's Pals curriculum effectively
- Enhance teachers' abilities to incorporate a teaching approach to strengthen protective factors in children during school by using focused listening, validating children's feelings and experiences, actively communicating clear norms, and guiding problem solving.

The 2-day parent educator training is designed to address:

- The risks that children face today and ways to build protective factors that shield them
- Parenting strategies that promote positive social and emotional development of young children
- Effective group facilitation
- How to establish an accepting, supporting, caring environment for parent groups

Training is offered by Wingspan, LLC, in Virginia, or it can be customized for onsite delivery to a group of 30 participants.

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### COST (estimated in U.S. dollars)

\$1,001–\$5,000

Cost considerations for implementing this program as recommended by the developer:

#### BUDGET COSTS

Al's Pals is made available as a package—training and curriculum together. If training is delivered on site in a community for a group of 30 people, the host school or organization is responsible for paying for the training facility, the trainers' travel expenses, food expenses, and the cost to ship materials.

#### TRAINING COSTS

2-day onsite session for up to 24 people . . . . . \$6,000  
(add \$250 per person for 25–32 people)

2-day training for one teacher, including  
one curriculum kit for the classroom . . . . . \$845

2-day training for one teacher, one assistant teacher,  
including one curriculum kit for one classroom . . . . . \$1,095



2-day training per teacher, for classroom that already has the curriculum . . . . .	\$250
2-day training for administrators or support staff (i.e., education coordinator, mental health consultant, guidance counselor, etc.), including a bound copy of the curriculum lessons . . . . .	\$250
2-day introductory training for a parent educator, including a complete manual of teaching modules, master copies of handouts, original songs on audiocassettes or CD, and posters . . . . .	\$400

**MATERIALS COSTS**

Materials are not offered separately from training. The parent letters need to be reordered each year: \$40 per classroom set of 14 different letters

Materials offered to those who have been trained include a puppet house and Curriculum Kit . . . . . \$595

**Curriculum Kit Contains:**

- Two manuals of 46 interactive lessons
- Three original puppets with puppet scripts
- Twelve original songs on cassette tape or CD-ROM and an oversized songbook
- Thirty-eight color photographs of real-life situations
- Fourteen sets of parent letters (also available in Spanish)

**INTENDED AGE GROUP**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD (0–4), CHILDHOOD (5–11)**

This program was developed for children 3 to 8 years of age.

**INTENDED POPULATION**

**AFRICAN AMERICAN, AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE, ASIAN AMERICAN, HISPANIC/LATINO, WHITE**

Multiple studies have been conducted of children who have participated in Al’s Pals. The demographic composition of these children, as reported by their teachers, is: 47% African American; 47% White; 2% Hispanic/Latino; 1% Asian American; 1% multiracial; 2% other. Many other children have received the program, without participating in outcome studies; their demographic information has not been reported to the developer.

## **GENDER FOCUS**

### **BOTH GENDERS**

This program was developed for both male and female children.

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## **REPLICATIONS**

Information on program implementations that have occurred since research was submitted to NREPP and CSAP for certification as a Model Program.

### **VIRGINIA**

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Virginia public elementary schools located in:**

Amherst Co., Augusta Co., Bedford Co., Bristol City, Charles City Co., Charlottesville, Danville, Dinwiddie Co., Essex Co., Fairfax Co., Gloucester Co., Goochland Co., Hampton, Henrico Co., King William Co., Lunenburg Co., Manassas Park City, New Kent Co., Newport News, Norton City, Petersburg, Richmond City, Richmond Co., Spotsylvania Co., Tazewell Co.

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Virginia public and private preschool and childcare centers located in:**

Charlottesville, Chesapeake, Chesterfield Co., Gloucester Co., Goochland Co., Hampton, Hanover Co., Henrico Co., Hopewell, James City Co., King William, Mathews Co., Middlesex Co., Portsmouth, Richmond City, Russell Co., Tazewell Co., Williamsburg, Virginia Beach, York Co.

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Virginia Head Start programs located in:**

Amelia Co., Augusta Co., Bath Co., Buckingham Co., Charlotte Co., Charlottesville, Culpeper Co., Cumberland Co., Danville, Fredericksburg, Gloucester Co., Goochland Co., Halifax Co., Hanover Co., Harrisonburg, Henrico Co., Highland Co., Hopewell, James City Co., King George Co., King William Co., Manassas City, Mathews Co., Middlesex Co., Newport News, Nottoway Co., Petersburg, Powhatan Co., Prince Edward, Prince William Co., Richmond City, Rockingham Co., Spotsylvania Co., Stafford Co., Staunton, Tazewell Co., Waynesboro, Williamsburg, York Co.

### **IOWA**

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Iowa Head Start programs located in:**

Buena Vista Co., Clay Co., Des Moines, Emmet Co., Indianola, Knoxville, Norwalk, Palo Alto Co., Union Co.

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Iowa preschool and childcare centers located in:**

Clay, Dallas, Des Moines, Dickinson, Indianola City, Jasper, Kossuth, Marion, O'Brian, Osceola, Sioux, Warren

### **LOUISIANA**

**Al's Pals is being implemented in Louisiana public elementary schools located in:**

Elton, Jennings, Lacassine, New Iberia, Welsh

## MICHIGAN

Al's Pals is being implemented in Michigan Head Start programs located in:

Bath, Charlotte, Durand, Eaton Rapids, E. Lansing, Grand Ledge, Haslett, Holt, Lansing, Mason, Owosso, Perry, St. John's

Al's Pals is being implemented in Michigan public elementary schools located in:

Mason

## MISSOURI

Independence Public Schools

Independence Public Schools Head Start

**These States are also in the process of planning for program implementation:**

## TEXAS

Newton Public Schools

## NEW JERSEY

Al's Pals is being implemented in several New Jersey school systems

## NEW YORK

Wingspan, LLC, is currently in the process of working with school districts in New York City.

## ARIZONA, ILLINOIS, AND KANSAS

Schools in these States are in the process of planning for program implementation.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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### INTENDED SETTINGS

#### Additional target settings where the Model Program has been replicated:

Elementary schools, private and public preschools, Head Start, childcare centers, and after-school programs

- Eight “Al-a-Grams” (bright, informative, school-to-home message pads, also available in Spanish)
- “Calm Down” and “Problem-Solving” posters
- Two children’s books

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

### ABOUT THE DEVELOPER

#### Susan R. Geller, M.S.

Al’s Pals was developed at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) under the leadership of Susan R. Geller. Ms. Geller holds a master’s degree in developmental psychology and has 25 years of experience in child development services and State-level prevention programming. As director of Prevention Services at VCU’s Virginia Institute for Developmental Disabilities, Ms. Geller directed a team of experts in early childhood education, child development, clinical social work, substance abuse and violence prevention, conflict resolution, and creative expression to create Al’s Pals. Ms. Geller currently manages Wingspan, LLC, which distributes Al’s Pals nationwide as part of its mission to strengthen young children’s personal, social, and emotional skills for life.

### FOR INFORMATION, CONTACT

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