

Literature Review

School-Based Bullying Prevention Approaches*

Bullying in schools has been a hot topic in recent years. To address the bullying problem, various school-based bullying prevention programs and approaches have been developed, implemented, and evaluated. This review provides a summary of school-based bullying and the programs—some more effective than others—that are being used to address the problem.

What Is Bullying?

To better understand the goals of bullying prevention programs in schools, it is necessary to understand what is meant by “bullying.” Who are the individuals involved? What outcomes result from their behaviors?

While there are various definitions of bullying (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Education, along with a panel of researchers and practitioners, recently established the following definition:

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7)

There are four main types of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and damage to property.

- **Physical** bullying involves the use of physical force (Gladden et al., 2014) and includes behaviors such as hitting, kicking, punching, spitting, tripping, and pushing. All of these behaviors fall within the realm of “violence,” and are not considered “bullying” if they occur only one time and without a perceived power imbalance. Thus, the key differences between physical bullying and school violence are that bullying involves an observed or perceived imbalance of power and is repeated or is highly likely to be repeated.

* Parts of this literature review have been drawn from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s [Model Programs Guide](#) (prepared by Development Services Group, Inc.). To access that review, see [Bullying literature review](#).

- **Verbal** bullying involves oral or written communication that causes harm to the targeted youth (Gladden et al., 2014) and includes name-calling, taunting, threatening words, notes, or gestures, and sexual comments.
- **Relational** bullying causes harm to reputations or relationships (Gladden et al., 2014) through social isolation, rumors, or posting embarrassing images electronically.
- **Damage to property** includes theft, alteration, or damage of property; refusing to return property; or deletion of personal electronic information (Gladden et al., 2014).

Bullying occurs through several modes. *Direct* bullying occurs in the presence of the youth, while *indirect* bullying does not require the victim to be in the physical presence of the bully and includes relational harms such as spreading rumors and encouraging others to exclude the youth. With the advent of the electronic age, cyberbullying over email, text, instant messaging, and social media have become common forms of bullying as well.

There are various roles youths play in the “circle of bullying” (Olweus, 2001). While some children are directly involved in bullying, others actively or passively assist the behavior or defend against it (StopBullying.gov, n.d.). Individuals who are directly involved in bullying include those who engage in bullying behaviors toward their peers and those who are the targets of bullying behavior (StopBullying.gov, n.d.). Some children are both bullied and engage in bullying and are referred to by researchers and others as bully/victims (see warning below about labeling children involved in bullying). Children who witness bullying are sometimes called bystanders. These children are tangentially involved in the behavior and include

- **Kids who assist.** These children may not start the bullying or lead in the bullying behavior, but serve as “assistants” to children who are bullying. These children may encourage the bullying behavior and occasionally join in.
- **Kids who reinforce.** These children are not directly involved in the bullying behavior, but they give the bully an audience. They will often laugh or provide support for the children who are engaging in bullying. This may encourage the bullying to continue.
- **Outsiders.** These children remain separate from the bullying situation. They neither reinforce the bullying behavior nor defend the child being bullied. Some may watch what is going on, but do not provide feedback about the situation to show they are on anyone’s side. Even so, providing an audience may encourage the bullying behavior.
- **Kids who defend.** These children actively comfort the child being bullied and may come to the child’s defense when bullying occurs. (StopBullying.gov, n.d.)

Labeling children involved in bullying may have unintended negative consequences for the children. The StopBullying.gov website recommends: “instead of labeling the children involved, focus on the behavior,” by using language such as “the child who (bullied/was bullied).”

Scope of the Problem

Accurate measurement of bullying can be challenging, since victims may be reluctant to report bullying (Goodwin, 2011) and self-report may underestimate the prevalence of bullying (Branson & Cornell, 2009). Yet, bullying has been acknowledged as a significant problem both nationally and internationally. The most recent data in the United States (Robers, Kemp,

Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014) cover the 2010–11 school year, during which 27.8 percent of students ages 12–18 reported having been bullied at school. Of these youths,

- Eighteen percent reported having been made fun of, called names, or insulted.
- Eighteen percent reported being the subject of rumors.
- Eight percent reported being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on.
- More than 5 percent reported being excluded from activities.
- Five percent reported being threatened with harm.
- More than 3 percent reported being forced to do things they didn't want to do.
- Almost 3 percent had property destroyed.
- Nine percent reported being cyberbullied.

Analyses of international data expose gender, geographic, and socioeconomic differences in bullying and bullying victimization. Among school children ages 11, 13, and 15 from 40 countries (Craig et al., 2009), data indicate that exposure to bullying is higher among boys (estimates ranging from 8.6 percent to 45.2 percent) than among girls (estimates ranging from 4.8 percent to 35.8 percent). In all countries across the globe, boys reported higher rates of bullying involvement, while the rates of victimization were higher for girls in 29 of the 40 countries (Craig et al., 2009). Data from the United States show that boys reported higher rates for damage to property and being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on. Girls reported higher rates of being made fun of, being the subject of rumors, being excluded from activities on purpose (Robers et al., 2014), and being victims of cyberbullying (Eaton et al., 2012). Children from Baltic countries (including Lithuania and Latvia) reported the highest rates of bullying and victimization, while those from Nordic countries reported the lowest rates (Craig et al., 2009). In a study on bullying in 28 countries, Due and colleagues (2009) found that socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents are at higher risk of victimization, compared with those from more affluent families. The study also found that students who attend school or live in a country with larger socioeconomic differences have a higher risk of being bullied.

Bullying in the United States occurs at all ages, but tends to peak in the middle school years. In 2010–11, 6th graders reported being bullied at a rate of 37 percent, 8th graders at a rate of almost 31 percent, 10th graders at a rate of 28 percent, and 12th graders at a rate of 22 percent. Interestingly, this overall trend is not mirrored in cyberbullying, which tends to peak in the high school years. Sixth graders reported being cyberbullied at a rate of almost 7 percent, 8th graders at a rate approaching 9 percent, 10th graders at a rate of almost 12 percent, and 12th graders at a rate under 8 percent (Robers et al., 2014).

Risk Factors for Bullying

Numerous studies – including a meta-analysis of 153 studies by Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek (2010) – have investigated risk factors for bullying and victimization of bullying, which tend to fall into five main categories, including individual, family, peers, community, and school.

Cook and colleagues (2010) reported that the strongest individual predictors of bullying behavior include significant externalizing behavior (such as defiance, aggression, disruption, and noncompliance), self-related cognitions (including self-respect, self-esteem, and self-

efficacy), and internalizing behavior (such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and avoidance). Family predictors of bullying behavior include family conflict and poor parental monitoring (Cook et al., 2010). Other contextual factors related to bullying include perceptions of school as having a negative atmosphere, negative influence by community factors, and negative peer influence (Cook et al., 2010).

The strongest individual predictors of victimization include demonstration of internalizing the symptoms (such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and avoidance), engagement in externalizing behavior (including defiance, aggression, disruption, and noncompliance), lack of adequate social skills, possession of negative self-related cognitions (such as self-respect, self-esteem, and self-efficacy), and difficulty solving social problems. Contextual factors most related to victimization include coming from a negative community, family, and school environment and experiencing noticeable rejection and isolation by peers (Cook et al., 2010).

Children who bully and are bullied tend to have both externalizing and internalizing problems, hold significantly negative attitudes and beliefs about themselves and others, have low social competence, display poor social problem-solving skills, perform poorly academically, and are not only rejected and isolated by peers, but are also negatively influenced by their peers (Cook et al., 2010).

Impacts of Bullying

Exposure to bullying and participation in bullying and other harmful behaviors can lead to a wide range of negative outcomes beyond physical harm.

Bullied youths and bystanders experience physical symptoms, including headache, stomachache, backache, and dizziness; and psychological symptoms, such as bad temper, feeling nervous, feeling low, difficulties in getting to sleep, morning tiredness, feeling left out, loneliness, and helplessness (Due et al., 2005; Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998; Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996). Children who are bullied experience high levels of loneliness, low self-esteem, psychosomatic complaints, depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Gini & Pozzoli 2008), agoraphobia and panic disorder (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Faris & Felmlee, 2011). Research has shown a relationship between victimization and risk for suicidal ideations or suicidal attempts (Rigby & Slee, 1999). Victimization has been shown to be related to various school-related problems, including negative perceptions of school, behavior problems, trouble concentrating on schoolwork, lower grades (Ferguson, San Miguel, Koburn, & Sanchez, 2007; Polanin et al., 2012), reduction in school engagement, poor academic performance (Seeley, Tombari, Bennett, & Dunkle, 2011; Limber, 2003), and school dropout (Sharp, 1995). Victimization has also been shown to be related to problems later in life, such as future bullying victimization in the workplace (Cosma & Baban, 2013; Schäfer et al., 2004) and lower labor force participation, employment rates, and hourly wages (Drydakis, 2014). Being bullied also raises the risk of violent behavior later in life by about one third (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012).

Children who bully have been shown to experience antisocial behaviors, depression, school problems, and suicidal ideations (Kaltiala-Heino Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000). Later in life, individuals who bully display higher levels of psychiatric problems, compared with their noninvolved peers (Kumpulainen et al., 1998). While bullies tend to experience fewer mental

health and social problems than those who are bullied (Ferguson et al., 2007; Salmon, James, & Smith 1998), research suggests that being a bully increases the risk of later violence in life by about two thirds (Ttofi et al., 2012). Being a bully also significantly raises the likelihood of being convicted of a criminal offense as an adult, of drug use, and of low job status, compared with noninvolved peers (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Olweus, 1997; Sourander et al., 2006; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). Bullies also tend to be at higher risk for difficulties in romantic relationships and substance use (Cook et al., 2010).

School-Based Bullying Prevention Approaches

Evidence-Based Approaches

Fortunately, various interventions have been shown by research to positively affect bullying.

Curricular approaches. Numerous curricula have been developed for use in schools. In general, programs try to explain bullying and its effects, teach strategies to avoid bullying or for intervening, and build social cohesion among students. Some programs attempt to build children's socioemotional, social-information processing, and other skills in an effort to reduce aggressive and violent behavior. More studies on the ages in which programs are most effective are needed (Smith et al., 2012) to determine when programs work better (middle school versus high school). While many curricular approaches are *universal* in scope, such that they are delivered to the schoolwide or classwide populations, others are *indicated* programs that are delivered to students who are exhibiting risk factors for bullying, or have demonstrated problem behaviors. Many of these programs have been evaluated, and some have been found to be effective in improving desired outcomes. Further studies have also shown that programs need to be intensive and long-lasting to reduce bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2010).

One example of a curricular approach is Steps to Respect®, a comprehensive bullying-prevention program for students in grades three to six. The program aims to counteract children's negative views regarding their ability to seek help for bullying problems. The program includes the following three components: 1) a schoolwide program guide in which the school administrators and staff establish schoolwide bullying policies and procedures that are designed to encourage discipline for bullying problems before they escalate; 2) staff training to help adults in the school recognize bullying, respond effectively to children's reports of bullying behavior, and coach students involved in bullying episodes; and 3) a classroom curriculum of 11 skill- and literature-based lessons presented over 12 to 14 weeks that apply cognitive-behavioral techniques to promote socially responsible norms and foster social-emotional skills.

Comprehensive approaches. These approaches target the larger school community in an effort to change school climate and norms. They acknowledge the need for a long-term commitment to addressing bullying specifically, but they often do so as part of a larger violence prevention effort (Limber, 2003). These approaches are meant to be formed to address the needs of a particular school or community, because simply dropping prefabricated programs into place rarely works (Seeley et al., 2011; StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

One example of a widely used comprehensive approach is the Safe & Civil Schools Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Model. This multicomponent, multitiered, comprehensive approach to schoolwide improvement emphasizes staff communication,

collaboration, and cohesion. The intervention provides tools and strategies to help educators in elementary, middle, and high schools establish proactive, positive (nonpunitive), and instructional schoolwide discipline policies. It also helps them manage student misbehavior, foster student motivation, and create a positive and productive school climate. This approach has been studied widely.

Approaches Lacking Evidence

Many different types of school-based bullying prevention efforts are used in schools across the world, but supportive evidence of their effectiveness is limited. Some typical types of interventions with little supportive research evidence include the following (Limber, 2003):

Awareness-raising efforts. Efforts include assemblies for students, parent meetings, and in-service training for teachers to make participants aware of the problem of bullying. While raising awareness is important, such efforts are insufficient to change cultural norms and bullying behaviors (Limber, 2003; StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

School exclusion. These efforts often resemble “zero tolerance” or “three strikes and you’re out” policies. Students identified as exhibiting bullying behavior are excluded from school. Research suggests that school exclusion interventions do not work, as they can decrease the reporting of incidents because the sanctions are so severe and they negatively affect, through suspension or expulsion, the students who are most in need of prosocial involvement at school (Limber, 2003; StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

Therapeutic treatment for bullies. Individual and/or family counseling with students displaying bullying behaviors may be an important part of a school’s bullying prevention or intervention approach (Olweus, 2001), but other approaches, such as classes in anger management or efforts to boost self-esteem and empathy, are unlikely to effectively address the problem of bullying because they are based on faulty assumptions about the motivating factors for bullying behavior (Limber, 2003). Moreover, grouping children who display bullying behavior together for treatment may further reinforce antisocial and bullying behavior (StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

Mediation and conflict resolution. These programs are often used to help school staff address aggressive and violent behavior between students. However, these types of programs can backfire when used to resolve bullying situations because they imply that both parties (children who engage in bullying and those who are targets of bullying behavior) are to blame. Moreover, these interactions may further victimize the target of bullying behavior (Limber, 2003; StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

Outcome Evidence

While many evaluations of programs aimed at preventing bullying have been conducted, evidence of the effectiveness of these programs has been mixed. Higher-quality evaluations, including those that used quasi-experimental designs and randomized controlled group designs, indicate that curricular and comprehensive approaches in schools may be promising.

Numerous meta-analyses have looked at the impact of antibullying programs. While there are some mixed findings (Ferguson et al., 2007; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004;

Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008), the preponderance of analyses conclude that programs have a positive impact in reducing bullying and victimization (Ttofi and Farrington, 2008; Polanin et al., 2012; Ttofi & Farrington, 2009; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

Some meta-analyses suggest that the effect of antibullying programs is limited. In an analysis of 42 studies, Ferguson and colleagues (2007) concluded that antibullying programs had a statistically significant positive effect, but that the effect was small enough that it lacked practical significance. Smith and colleagues (2004) concluded similarly that the majority of programs made a negligible impact on bullying behavior. In a meta-analysis of 16 studies, Merrell and colleagues (2008) found that antibullying interventions produce meaningful and clinically important effects, but only for about one third of the factors assessed; the majority of outcomes showed no change at all, and a small number showed negative impacts.

Other meta-analyses suggest that antibullying programs do make a positive impact. Ttofi and colleagues (2008) found that antibullying programs led to a 17 percent to 23 percent reduction in bullying and victimization; programs appeared to more effective with older children and were somewhat less effective in the United States than in Europe. Polanin and colleagues (2012) found that school-based programs addressing bystanders were successful overall, but program effects were largest for high school samples, which concurs with the findings of Ttofi and colleagues (2008). However, in contrast to Ttofi and Farrington (2008), Polanin and colleagues (2012) found programs in the United States and other countries equally effective. An additional review by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that programs decreased bullying by 20 percent to 23 percent and victimization by 17 percent to 20 percent. Wong (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of school-based bullying prevention programs for K-12 students and found that the programs made small, significant impacts in reducing bullying and victimization.

Ttofi and Farrington (2009) conducted a systematic review to assess the elements of antibullying programs that were associated with decreases in bullying. They found that the most important elements of antibullying programs included parent training, playground supervision, disciplinary methods, school conferences, classroom rules, and classroom management. Those elements associated with decreases in victimization included use of videos, disciplinary methods, work with peers, parent training, duration, and cooperative group work.

Conclusions

Bullying has been widely covered in both popular and academic literature and is a significant problem in schools both nationally and internationally. The impacts of bullying are widespread and can lead to serious long- and short-term problems, including physical, psychological, academic, and employment-related issues. Schools employ various efforts in an attempt to reduce and prevent school-based bullying. Awareness-raising efforts, school exclusion, therapeutic treatment for bullies and mediation and conflict resolution have not been found to be effective bullying reduction or prevention measures. Curricular approaches, including universal and indicated programs, as well as comprehensive approaches targeting the larger school community have been shown to be effective at reducing problem behaviors and victimization in schools.

Additional Resources

Bullying literature review

<http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Bullying.pdf>

Youth Violence: Prevention Strategies

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/prevention.html>

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