Bullying Programs in the Schools

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Bullying has been the focus of many national and international studies over the past thirty years. Schools have begun to realize how bullying is a high incident condition which affects the lives of many students. Recently, there have been a plethora of school shootings in which the shooters have been targets of bullying. This evidence, along with many other studies have made people aware of the seriousness of school bullying and the need for evidence-based programs that will help reduce the prevalence of bullying.

It is difficult to agree on the definition of bullying. In the literature, you will find many different definitions. Yet, all of these definitions have a commonality: bullying is a subset of aggression. (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). In one article, bullying was defined as repeated, intentional, harmful, and aggressive behavior inflicted by a person or group with seemingly more power on a person or group with lesser power (Nansel et al., 2001). In another article, bullying was coined as “mobbing” and defined by Daniel Olweus as an individual or a group of individuals harassing, teasing, or pestering another person. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003).

Bullying occurs when there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. There are also many different forms of bullying. For example, bullying can be physical manifesting itself in the form of kicking, hitting, pushing, choking, etc. Bullying can also be verbal resulting in name calling, threatening, taunting, malicious teasing, spreading nasty rumors, etc. (Nation, Perkins, and Santinello, 2008) Bullying may also manifest itself in other ways. For example, bullying can be social if one is intentionally excluded from a group. Bullying may also be seen in other ways such as making faces or obscene gestures. Bullying also goes through stages and is manifested in different ways in differing age groups. In children, bullying is primarily physical. In adolescents, bullying becomes relational aggression which is defined as aggression directed at damaging a relationship. In adulthood, bullying often appears in the form
of sexual harassment. Also, bullying is more prevalent at different developmental levels. There is an increase and peak during early adolescence. Then, during high school, there is a decrease in bullying. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003).

There are many characteristics that bullies and their victims are inclined to have. It has been found that bullies tend to be popular in the school and have a lot of friends. It is also common for bullies to have been bullied themselves in the past. For example, Secret Service conducted an interview study of friends and families of 41 school shooters. They found that 71% of the shooters in their study had been bullied. Victims have their own set of characteristics. Victims are likely to express a fear of fighting and do not defend themselves. They tend to have a negative attitude toward aggression and are physically weaker than their classmates. Victims often tend to have low self-esteem and have overly supportive and authoritarian parents. (Turkel, 2007) Although there is evidence for these characteristics, recent studies have called this categorization of students as “bullies” or “victims” into question.

Bullying behaviors are very dynamic, not static. Students can be a bully one day and a victim the next. Children do not always fall into a specific category. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003)

How common is bullying? As stated above, because of the growing rates of bullying, school bullying has been the target of many studies over the past 30 years. In 2001, the American Medical Association conducted a study looking at bullying in grades 6 through 10. They interviewed 15,686 students across the US and found that 29.9% of students reported being involved in bullying frequently. 13% reported being involved as a bully, 10.6% as a victim, and 6% as a bully-victim. They estimated that over 3.2 million youngsters are victims of bullying annually. (Turkel, 2007) An estimated 1.6 million students in the US are bullied at least once a week. Other research has found that 26% of boys reported bullying others
“sometimes” to “weekly,” and 21% of boys reported being bullied “sometimes” to “weekly.” Statistics show that bullying is a significant problem in the schools that occurs quite often. (Black and Jackson, 2007)

Many studies have investigated the long term effects of bullying. The results do not look good for bullies or their victims. First of all, bullies and their victims are more likely to be involved in violent behavior in the future compared with those who have not been involved in bullying. Those involved in bullying are more at risk for future violent acts such as carrying weapons, fighting, and being injured in a fight. It has been shown that bullying is a sign of potential psychiatric disorder in bullies and their victims that may stay with the person through adulthood. (Turkel, 2007) Also, later in young adulthood, male victims are at risk for anxiety while male bullies are at risk for personality disorders. Victims are also prone to depression in the future. (Kumpulainen, 2008) Those who are bullies and are bullied themselves are at the most risk for future problems. Bullying has also been shown to lead to sexual harassment. Children learn bullying behavior when they are involved as young children. Being involved in aggressive acts like bullying prepares boys for sexual harassment. One-third of teenage girls are subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from male peers by the end of high school. (Turkel, 2007)

Because bullying is a common occurrence with many negative effects, it is also important to be able to effectively assess the incidence of bullying and identify bullies, victims, and bystanders. This is essential in developing bully prevention programs. There are a few standard assessment methods that are generally used to assess bullying. Self-report scales and surveys are pretty common and are often the preferred method. Surveys can be given to students as well as teachers and other school staff. When surveys are given to students, the questions are usually
focused on how often students engaged in certain behaviors over specific time periods. Questions ask about involvement in bullying behaviors as well as being a victim to bullying. The problem with this method is that self-report measures can sometimes be unreliable. Also, it is up for debate if a definition of bullying should be given with the survey. Some researchers believe that it is necessary while others think it primes a student to respond a particular way. Other assessment measures involve peer and teacher nomination tasks. This involves students and teachers identifying students who exhibit bullying behaviors. Yet, this is most effective in elementary school settings in which teachers are more involved with individual students. Behavioral observations are also effective when assessing bullying behavior. The important thing to note, however, is that observations are most effective when conducted across a long period of time and in a variety of settings. This will allow researchers to assess the situational and contextual factors that contribute to bullying. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003) Functional behavior assessment may also be helpful when assessing bullying behavior. Sometimes, it is necessary to identify specific problem students who contribute to bullying. Once students are identified, a functional behavior assessment may be helpful. A functional assessment of aggressive behavior could allow school personnel to identify the function of a particular student’s bullying behaviors and provide a behavior plan that will reduce this behavior. (Colvin et al., 1998) Anger has also been found to be a strong predictor of bullying. This is something that may be looked at in a clinical setting. However, assessments in the school environment where bullying takes place will most likely be the most helpful, especially when developing prevention programs. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003)

There are a great number of contributory factors and causes of bullying that have been topics of research. First of all, there are home and family issues that can contribute to bullying
behavior. To begin with, a lack of parental involvement in the child’s life can lead to bullying behavior. Also, a lack of parental warmth can contribute. Furthermore, bullying is known to be related to aggression. Therefore, parents that allow their children to be inappropriately and excessively aggressive towards their peers, siblings, or even adults is known to lead to aggression in bullying. Another parental risk factor is seen when parents discipline their children through physical punishments or emotional outbursts. (Turkel, 2007)

One particular study by Georgiou (2008) investigated the effect that mothers have on bullying and victimization. This study used 252 elementary school students with a mean age of 11.5 years and their mothers. A theoretically driven model was used to examine the data gathered. This model was based off of social learning theory. Information was gathered from the child and the mother. The parental style from the point of view of the child was investigated as well as the emotional state of the mother and level of involvement of the mother through a self-report measure. Also, the amount of victimization experienced by the child in school was looked at. Through a confirmatory factor analysis, it was found that the more involved the mother was in the student’s life, the better the child adjusted in school. School adjustment included academic achievement as well as social adaptation. Maternal responsiveness was also negatively correlated with aggression in school. Aggression in school encompassed bullying as well as disruptive behavior. Although it appears that an involved mother is beneficial for the child, especially regarding bullying, overprotective mothering had negative effects. Overprotective mothering was correlated with a high incidence of victimization experienced by the child. Lastly, depressive mothering was associated with both bullying behavior and victimization of the child. This study demonstrates how mothers can have a significant effect on their children when it comes to bullying as well as their child’s entire school experience.
Because of this, parenting should most definitely be taken into account when schools are designing and implementing bully intervention programs. (Georgiou, 2008)

Although there is some evidence that bullying is related to personality and neuropsychological disorders, most researchers agree that bullying behavior is more closely related to social factors and family background. Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) found that children learn to be aggressive by watching their family interactions. They specifically learn to bully those with less power than themselves as their parents take their stress out on their children. Their research shows specifically how particularly harsh parenting techniques with inconsistent punishment often leads to aggression in children. Parents who poorly manage conflict also contribute to bullying behavior in their children. (Georgiou, 2008) Connolly and O’Moore (2003) found that there are other family factors that can affect aggressive behavior. Their research shows that the father’s absence physically or psychologically may lead to aggressive bullying behavior. Also, the presence of a depressive mother can contribute. Furthermore, Connolly and O’Moore (2003) found a correlation between bullying behavior and incidents of domestic violence in the home. Through self-report measures, it was found that victims of bullying see their families as controlling and overprotective. However, if the parent is involved in the child’s life and is not seen as too controlling by the child, bullying behavior and victimization can be reduced. A study by Rigby (2003) also found that the perception of the children is important regarding bullying behavior. They found that children who perceived their parents as thinking highly of them were less likely to be involved in bullying. Bullies tend to perceive their families as being less cohesive, having more conflict, and being less organized. Having a mother and father in the child’s life that run an organized household can decrease the chances that their child will bully or be bullied. (Georgiou, 2008)
There are also some causes and contributory factors of bullying that are not due to familial issues. The desire of control, revenge, envy, and emotional stress are all causes of bullying. Often, bullies have previously been bullied themselves. It is common for bullies to have emotional or physical abuse in their histories. It was also found that anger is a strong predictor of bullying through a study of 558 middle school students. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003) Bullies also have a high incidence of conduct and adjustment disorders. Bullies tend to also be popular and have many friends. There are also trigger factors that can cause bullying. These trigger factors include diversity in race, religion, language, and sexual orientation. (Turkel, 2007).

Recent meta-analysis findings have shown only modest results when analyzing the effects of anti-bullying programs. These meta-analyses also showed conflicting results with most anti-bullying programs showing non-significant outcomes. What they did find is that programs that closely monitored the correct implementation of the program had larger effect sizes. Further study has shown that classrooms in which teachers implement programs steadily and correctly had the highest reductions in student-reported bullying problems. (Hirschstein, 2007) There are also other components of anti-bullying programs that have been found to be effective. Publically displaying school rules and making sure students understand them is important. It is also helpful to reward students for following school rules. Having school connectedness and staff training also increases the effectiveness of programs. Furthermore, tailoring approaches for different schools and targeting at risk students is significant. As mentioned above, parent involvement is also important because the home environment has such a significant effect. (Black and Jackson, 2007)
One such meta-analysis was conducted by Fergusen et al. (2007). They researched articles on bullying that had been published between the years of 1995 and 2006 and that were published in peer-reviewed journals. Outcome variables in the studies had to clearly measure some element of bullying behavior or aggression toward peers, including direct aggressive behavior toward children in a school setting. Also, the articles included had to involve some form of control or contrast group to test program effectiveness. Pre and post test only designs were not included. Also, the intervention programs implemented had to be school based in order to be part of the analysis. Results of the analysis suggested a small but significant effect for anti-bullying programs ($r = .12$). This study also found that the greatest effect was found for anti-bullying programs that targeted at risk students ($r = .19$). (Ferguson et al., 2007)

Another meta-analysis examining bullying prevention programs was done by Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isava (2008). The authors conducted their analysis of school bullying intervention research across the 25-year period from 1980 through 2004. There were five inclusion criteria that studies had to meet. First of all, each study had to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based intervention. They had to use an experimental or quasi-experimental design to do this. Secondly, the intervention had to address bullying behavior. Furthermore, bullying behavior had to be the main focus or at least a primary component of the intervention plan. Fourth, each study had to report their data in statistics that could be used in order to calculate an effect size. Lastly, studies were taken from peer reviewed journals as well as doctoral dissertations and chapters in edited books. In this time frame and with these conditions, researchers identified 16 studies that met the criteria. These studies included 15,386 kindergarten through 12th grade student participants from European nations and the United States. When they averaged effect sizes from the studies, the authors found that the intervention
studies demonstrated significant effects for about one third of the variables. The majority of the outcomes investigated showed no meaningful effects. This analysis, however, received mixed results. For instance, they found an effect size of .27 for student self-reports on being bullied, meaning that students reported a moderate effect of a reduction in bullying. Yet, teachers reported increases of bullying with an effect size of -3.81. Researchers examined 28 different intervention outcome types, with only 10 of them showing significant results. Three areas that did show significant results were student self-reports of being bullied, witnessing bullying, and global self-esteem. Three other areas showing significant results were teacher self-reports of knowledge of bullying prevention, appropriate staff responses to bullying, and efficacy of intervention skills. Another significant area was teacher reports of student’s social competence. Two other areas were peer reports of participation in bullying roles, and peer acceptance. Lastly, school records of teacher discipline referrals were found to be significant. The authors concluded that school bullying interventions may show positive outcomes, but mostly for attitudes and knowledge regarding bullying rather than actual bullying behavior. (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008)

There are several bully prevention programs that have some evidence for effectiveness. The Steps to Respect Program is one of them. The Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program was started by the Committee for Children in 2001. It is a Bully prevention program that is meant to be used in schools. The Steps to Respect program is designed to decrease school bullying problems by increasing staff awareness and responsiveness, fostering socially responsible beliefs, and teaching social-emotional skills to counter bullying and promote healthy relationships. The program also aims to promote skills such as group joining and conflict resolution that are associated with general social competence. The Steps to Respect program
comprises a school-wide program guide, staff training, and classroom lessons for students in Grades 3 through 6. (Frey, et al., 2005) This program trains staff and has a connected, whole school approach. This program also includes parents with a parent presentation and with materials about the program that are sent home. This increases parent awareness and involvement. The lessons for the students last for about 12 to 14 weeks. The lessons focus on teaching friendship skills, emotional regulation skills, bullying prevention skills, identifying bullying behavior, and using these skills in daily life. This program also includes individual interventions for problem students. The “Four-A-Response” is used which includes affirming the behavior, asking questions, assessing immediate safety, and acting. Students involved in bullying are then coached and given the support they need. A plan is made for students to follow. Students are then monitored to see if the plan is working. (Hirschstein et al., 2007)

A study was done by Frey et al. (2005) to determine the effectiveness of the Steps to Respect program. This study examined the effects of children in grades 3 through 6. Six schools were randomly assigned to either a control condition or a bullying intervention. Schools were from two suburban school districts and were matched by size, ethnic breakdown, and the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. In order for schools to participate, at least 80% of staff had to have voted to participate, the school had to agree to random assignment, and the principals had to agree that they would not implement any other bullying program during the study. The effects of the Steps to Respect program were measured through a randomized control design. This was a longitudinal study that observed the effects of the program after one year of implementation. Bullying behavior was observed before, during, and after program implementation. In order to monitor the effects of bullying, this study used playground observations and student self-reports. Teacher reports were also used to monitor student’s social
interactions. Teachers rated students with the Peer-Preferred Social Behavior subscale of the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment, Elementary Version (Walker & McConnell, 1995) while students filled out the Student Experience Survey: What School Is Like for Me. The Student Experience Survey is a 60-item measure designed to assess student-reported experiences and attitudes related to bullying. This study found that after one year of program implementation, there was a decline of bullying behavior and argumentative behavior on the playground. When the intervention group students were compared to the control group, they found that the intervention group had increases in agreeable interactions as well as reduced destructive bystander behavior. Students in the intervention group reported more bystander responsibility, increased adult responsiveness, and less acceptance of bullying and aggressive behavior than those students in the control group. The effects seen in this study were consistent across age and gender. Standardized mean differences calculated for the six schools in this study illustrated intervention effects of d=.31. (Cohen, 1988). This is considered to be a moderate effect size. This demonstrates that the Steps to Respect program was moderately effective in reducing bullying behavior for the six schools involved. (Frey, et al., 2005)

The Olweus Bully Prevention Program (Olweus et al., 1999) is another bullying prevention program that has been shown to be effective. It is an anti-bullying program designed to help identify bullies in elementary school, middle school, and high school. It also aims to help bullies, as well as their victims, cope with the effects of this type of school violence. The Olweus Bully Prevention Program (BPP) starts with a needs assessment to identify prevalence, types, areas and attitudes related to bullying. This needs assessment is repeated once a year in order to evaluate the success of the program. A coordinating committee, comprised of teaching and non-teaching staff and community members, uses the needs assessment data to develop specific plans to
implement in the school using the strategic BPP model. The BPP model outlines school, class and individual level interventions. An important aspect of the program is that it allows for flexibility in interventions depending on cultural and developmental issues. In order to promote an anti-bullying atmosphere, there are several core components of the program that are used. Core components of the program are rules against bullying, a bullying awareness day, improving supervision, parent involvement, class councils, a working system of positive and negative consequences, and individual interventions. Also, rewarding positive behavior is an important aspect of the program. Positive incentive programs are designed and implemented in each school the program is used in. Incentives vary by developmental level and current fads. But, stickers, point systems or movie tickets are popular incentives that may be raffled to students with good behavior. (Black and Jackson, 2007)

A study was conducted by Black and Jackson (2007) in order to assess the effectiveness of the Olweus Bully Prevention Program. This study used six schools from a large urban school district. From these six schools, sixty-seven percent of students were from low-income families. Also, students were predominantly minority with 81.8% African American and 9.6% Latino. The program began with certified Olweus program trainers teaching the correct model to representatives in each school. This was done to make sure the program was implemented correctly. A mixed methods design was used. An independent evaluator performed 319 observations sets over 7,589 minutes in order to determine bullying incident density. This method was used to monitor the amount of bullying taking place. Lunch and recess observations were used. Data was converted to standardized incident density through the calculation: \[ \text{BID} = \frac{I^* (100/n^* 60/t)}{} \] where: \( I \) = number of incidents; \( n \) = total number of students observed; \( t \) = total time period observed in minutes. All six schools implemented the Olweus program across four
years. At the end of the study, researchers found that bullying incident density decreased by 45 percent from an average of 65 incidents per 100 student hours at baseline to an average of 36 incidents per 100 student hours at the conclusion of the study. Schools with the greatest reductions in BID were consistently implementing vital aspects of the program which included posting rules, consistent enforcement of rules, positive incentive programs, an organized student flow, reorganization of lunches or recess to reduce large numbers of students, providing positive age appropriate activities for students, and having interested adults who interact with students one-on-one. (Black and Jackson, 2007)

Another bullying intervention program that is quite interesting, is a martial arts program implemented in elementary schools. The intervention is called The Gentle Warrior Program, and it is a traditional martial arts-based intervention to reduce aggression in children. This program is meant to give children psychosocial benefits that research suggests comes from martial arts. The Gentle Warrior Program is part of the Creating a Peaceful School Learning Environment (CAPSLE) program that focuses on reducing school violence by promoting a social environment where bully-victim relationships are viewed as unhealthy and wrong. This program tries to involve students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff. The Gentle Warrior part of the program is meant to promote this environment by advocating nonaggressive attitudes, respect for self and others, and self protective techniques. This program aims to develop effective social problem solving skills in the students. Also, like many other martial arts programs, this intervention teaches self-control, empathy, and respect. This study involved 254 elementary school children in grades 3, 4, and 5. There were 147 boys, and 107 girls. The children participated in The Gentle Warrior for 2 years plus a one year maintenance phase. The first two years consisted of nine 45 minute sessions while the third year consisted of three 45
minute sessions. Bullying behavior was measured through student self-report surveys. This study found that boys who participated in the program reported lower frequencies of aggression and a greater frequency of helpful behavior to victims of bullying. The effect of participation of helpful behavior towards victims was fully mediated by changes in child empathy. Although these results are promising, there were no significant results for girls. There was a significant decrease of aggression for boys with an effect size of -.31 but not for girls with an effect size of .14. So, this study only gives promising evidence for the use of martial arts programs in elementary schools for boys. (Twemlow et al., 2008)

Most interventions for bullying involve school programs due to the fact that most bullying occurs in the school environment. But, there are some interventions that can be done outside of school. As stated above, it is important to have parental involvement in bully intervention plans. Parents have a large influence on their children at home, and this should not be ignored. There are also some clinical interventions that can be done outside of school. For example, Espelage and Swearer (2003) discuss the effects of anger on bullying. In a study of many middle school students, it was found that the strongest predictor of bullying is anger. Therefore, anger management training may be beneficial for some students who bully their peers. Also, most bullying prevention programs assume that bullies do not feel empathy. Yet, research indicates that many self-declared bullies sometimes report feeling sorry after they have bullied their peers. This shows that empathy training may also be helpful in reducing bullying behavior. This sort of training may be done in a clinic outside of school, but may still improve bullying behavior in the school setting. (Espelage and Swearer, 2003)
Although using a method that is evidence based is the best way to have success with a bullying program, many schools still use their own, non-validated techniques. The most common use of non-validated techniques comes from teachers. Some teachers believe certain techniques are effective even when they have no evidence to support it. The techniques found to be most favored by teachers were the use of verbal reprimands and trying to reason with the bully. This may be useful for a select few students but otherwise, there are much more effective ways to help. (Tattum and Lane, 1994) Research shows that students are skeptical of their teachers’ abilities to deal with bullying issues. This is not surprising when other research shows that teachers have a very poor understanding of bullying and how to manage it if they are not properly trained. If teachers are not properly trained which is often the case, they cannot be blamed for using non-validated techniques. Therefore, teacher training should always be a component of a bullying prevention program. (James et al., 2008)

Indeed, there are many negative short term and long term effects of bullying for the victim and the perpetrator. This makes implementing evidence based bully prevention programs essential. Yet, meta-analyses that have examined such programs have received results that are not very impressive. More research needs to be conducted on individual bullying programs and what components are effective. Also, effective assessment measures for bullying such as Functional Behavior Assessments should be used. This would allow researchers to develop more effective programs. Although research may still be limited, schools should still try to use programs that have some evidence for success and use techniques that have been validated such as using a whole school approach and involving parents in the program. With a growing knowledge of the severity of the problem, the issue of bullying will not be ignored.
References


