THE STEPS TO RESPECT PROGRAM USES A MULTILEVEL APPROACH TO REDUCE PLAYGROUND BULLYING AND DESTRUCTIVE BYSTANDER BEHAVIORS [5220]

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Abstract

Bullying reduction efforts benefit from combining universal and selected interventions. All children are involved occasionally as aggressor, victim or encouraging bystander, and some children are frequently involved. Bullying behavior is amply rewarded in the school environment. The *Steps to Respect* program aims to reduce rewards by increasing adult intervention and support for socially responsible student behavior. Cognitive-behavioral classroom curricula address peer norms, assertiveness, and general social-emotional skills. A random control trial showed decreases in playground bullying and negative bystander behavior after one year. Longitudinal analyses showed declines in all five problem behaviors after two years. Results were strongest when teachers also coached individuals involved in bullying. Compared to 'zero-tolerance' models, coaching offers advantages with respect to student reporting rates, discipline consistency, time-savings, and educational opportunities.

Introduction

In the United States, national attention and state legislative mandates focused on the problem of school bullying after studies showed that a majority of school shootings had been carried out by young people who had been chronically victimized. Although these shocking events led to a new willingness to recognize and respond to the problem of school victimization, they are not representative view of the ways in which young people are typically affected by bullying.

In its most basic form, ullying consists of the exploitation of power imbalances in order to dominate and harm others physically, socially, or emotionally (Olweus 1991). For many young people, involvement as either the target or perpetrator of bullying may be an occasional occurrence. For others, it may signify a chronic and harmful behavior pattern. The severity of adjustment problems that accompany bullying also vary dramatically.

For victims, chronic bullying is most commonly associated with declines in school attendance (Slee 1994), graduation rates (Sharp 1995), and academic performance (Schwartz and Gorman 2003). As early as kindergarten, children who are bullied develop negative school attitudes (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1996). Emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression, are common among those chronically victimized and may include self-inflicted violence (see Hawker and Boulton 2000, for review). If victimization continues over multiple years, emotional problems become progressively more severe NRfu(Hanish and Guerra 2002; Kochenderfer and Ladd 1997)

s for children who bully, there is considerable evidence that some are indeed at risk for delinquent activities (Olweus 1991), including carrying weapons at school (Berthhold and Hoover 2000), and becoming involved in street violence (Andershed, Kerr, and Stattin 2001). A large cross national study showed that bullying was more strongly associated with student violence than fighting or weapons carrying (Smith-Khuri et al. 2004). More common problems of adolescence, such as poor school adjustment, alcohol use (Nansel et al. 2001), and

dating aggression (Connolly, Pepler, Craig and Taradash 2000) are also associated with bullying. Thus, bullying is associated with problems at multiple points on a continuum of adolescent adjustment.

The wide range in severity of apparent consequences makes sense when considering the range of involvement possible for young people. Many studies find prevalence rates similar to those reported by Nansel and colleagues (2001): 30 percent of young people are chronically involved as bullies, victims, or bully-victims. Familiar with these estimates of chronically involved children, many people are surprised to hear that most children are involved in bullying at least occasionally. Two hours of playground observations per student indicated that 77 percent of third- to –sixth grade students bullied or encouraged others to bully at least once (Frey et al. 2005). Surveys tell a similar story for older students. Espelage and Holt (2001) found that only 15 percent of middle school students reported frequent bullying, whereas 80 percent admitted bullying someone in the past month.

This high level of involvement may be less surprising when one considers that preadolescents and adolescents are experiencing new levels of power in their lives, and are learning how to use it. Young people have relatively few opportunities to use power in a constructive manner and, in the absence of explicit instruction, may not understand the consequences and moral implications of bullying. Interest in power is natural, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that some of that interest gets channeled into the abuse of power.

This developmental view of bullying provides a framework for prevention efforts. The role of adults is to help channel children's normal interest in power and influence into constructive pathways, while blocking destructive ones. Temper tantrums among two-year-olds may provide a useful analogy. Engaging in this developmentally typical behavior does not mean the child is going to grow up to be antisocial. The outlook changes to a negative one, however, for children who do not outgrow the behavior. Similarly, bullying may represent "experimental" behavior for many children, tapering off in the absence of rewards. Unfortunately, aggression can pay off handsomely with respect to social status and access to resources (Pellegrini 2002). These rewards encourage destructive behavior and hinder the development of respectful interactions and mature forms of influence.

The rewards young people receive for bullying pose challenges for intervention. Most experts in the field recommend that schools undertake interventions at multiple levels: (a) school-wide, (b) within the classroom and peer group, and (c) at the individual level for those involved in bullying. Our experience in evaluating one such program, *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program* (Committee for Children, 2001), shows that educators can effect major changes in school bullying.

A Multilevel Bullying Prevention Program

Steps to Respect is a multilevel program designed to reduce bullying problems by coordinating a school-wide environmental intervention, a classroom-based cognitive-behavioral curriculum, and a selective intervention for students involved in bullying events. The universal environmental intervention aims to provide adults and children with systemic support and specific procedures that counter bullying and motivate socially responsible behavior. Classroom lessons and instructional practices starting in grade 3 or 4 target children's normative beliefs related to bullying (Huesmann and Guerra 1997), as well as social-emotional skills for responding to bullying and increasing peer acceptance. (For a more detailed program description, see Hirschstein and Frey, in press).

In addition to the universal elements, the *Steps to Respect* program includes a coaching system for students at risk of developing bullying-related adjustment problems. These students are selected based on involvement in a bullying event.

Schoolwide Environmental Intervention

The purpose of the school-wide intervention is to establish a framework for an adult-child partnership. Young people are highly successful in hiding their coercive activities from adults, who greatly underestimate the seriousness and extent of bullying at their schools (Atlas and Pepler 1998). Adults cannot successfully act against bullying if young people do not entrust them with information about it.

The reciprocal is also true, children will not entrust adults with information about bullying if adults do not increase their awareness or ability to intervene. Children correctly perceive that adults rarely intervene (Frey et al. 2005; Olweus 1991) a perception that can undermine respect for adults, and communicate that adult norms of behavior are not relevant to children's experience. One of the more extreme examples of what has been called "the code of silence" occurs when students know that weapons have been brought to school and fail to report, despite their fear. It is clear that in order for children to ask for help, they need to have experienced times in which adults invited disclosure and followed through effectively.

The goal of the school-wide environmental intervention is to establish mutual trust and supports for effective action. It attempts to do that by (a) developing and communicating clear school-wide anti-bullying policies and procedures, (b) increasing adult monitoring and intervention, and (c) increasing adult support for socially responsible student behavior.

(a) Anti-bullying policy and procedures
Adults and students at schools need to know what the rules and expectations are. They need a shared understanding of bullying, and the consequences and sequence of events if the rules are violated.

(b) Training that increases adult awareness and intervention
Motivating supervisory adults to notice and intervene effectively are key program goals. It is particularly difficult for adults to recognize bullying perpetrated by students who are socially skilled and well-behaved in class (Frey, in press). Thus, it is important that training dispel myths such as those suggesting that only problem children bully, or that bullying is an inconsequential event. The need for consistent intervention and follow-up of bullying incidents is emphasized. Teachers, school psychologists, and administrators receive training in the coaching model used with selected, at-risk students.

(c) Support of socially responsible behavior
A third aim of the environmental intervention is to support children's socially responsible behavior. Present at 85 percent of bullying events, bystanders rarely intervene, even though bullying typically ends quickly when they do (Craig and Pepler, 1995; Hawkins, Pepler and Craig 2001). Bystanders report experiencing many emotional reactions: interest, anxiety about being a target, guilt about the victim's suffering, and uncertainty regarding what to do (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, and Charach 1994). By providing guidelines and recognition for appropriate responses, the program aims to discourage bystanders from watching and joining in and to encourage actions that help the child being bullied.

Cognitive-behavioral Classroom Curricula

The classroom curricula focus on the building blocks of social behaviors: social skills and motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Huesman 1988). Through direct instruction and interactive techniques, students learn skills specific to bullying situations: identification of bullying, assertive responses to provocation, and risk assessment. They engage in problem-solving and identify adults in the school they would seek out for help.

The program also instructs children with respect to emotion regulation and social skills. Because friendship serves to buffer children from bullying (Hodges, Malone, and Perry 1997), *Steps to Respect* includes lessons

on making and keeping friends. Emotion regulation skills are important in friendships, and these skills may also aid students in dealing with bullying. The strong emotions that bullying engenders can undermine children's ability to respond assertively or to support a classmate. Practice in calming techniques may help children avoid the exaggerated distress responses typical of preferred targets (Schwartz, Dodge, and Coie 1993).

The Contribution of Beliefs to Motivation

Skills represent only part of the story. Bullies who have high perspective-taking skills, for example, may rely on their abilities to avoid detection as well as choose the most effective means for dominating or humiliating classmates. Lacking in this case is the motivation to treat classmates with respect and caring. Because young people show little empathy for victims of bullying (Pelligrini and Long 2002), *Steps to Respect* lessons aim to foster children's empathy with activities that highlight the feelings of fictional victims.

Expectations of rewards or punishment also affect motivation. Because adults rarely intervene, young people often bully with impunity (Hoover et al. 1992). Many believe that aggression leads to positive outcomes (Perry, Perry and Rasmussen 1986), a belief that is often borne out with respect to bullying. Both the environmental intervention and classroom curricula aim to directly counter this belief by creating a high profile anti-bullying effort. Newsletters, lessons and parent nights promote the theme of a community effort against bullying. By increasing children's expectations of adult sanctions for bullying, and reinforcement for socially responsible behavior, the program aims to reduce bullying and increase reporting when children are targeted for abuse.

The Coaching Model for Selected Students

Based on research indicating that many children are occasionally involved in bullying but that a much smaller number become chronically involved, the *Steps to Respect* program aims to intervene following low-level offenses, before destructive behaviors become entrenched. Any student who is identified as a participant in a bullying incident, whether as bully or victim is selected for individual coaching. This uses a problem-solving approach to address student security and deterrence, applying consequences in an incremental fashion. The approach is exemplified by the procedures used by Maureen Blum, principal at Our Lady of the Lake, a kindergarten-through-eighth grade school. It has proved popular with parents and teachers, who view it as an effective means of reducing an age-old problem, while supporting the development of their children.

Coaching the child who bullied
Staff members have the child read through the Bullying Behaviors List to identify his or her own behavior. They work with the child to apply the definition of bullying to that behavior. Children in fourth grade and above fill in parts of the Bullying Report Form themselves.

Children are asked, Why is this happening? What's going on? What are you going to do to change this? After child and adult have drawn up a behavior-change plan, the child writes a note to his or her parents to let them know about the conversation. Blum believes this helps parents focus on the behavior rather than on a pejorative label. The child leaves the coaching session knowing what he or she needs to address or do differently. If there is additional involvement, the principal brings the student who is bullying, together with parents and teachers. Coaching proceeds along with additional elements of the school disciplinary process.

Coaching the child who was bullied
With a child who has been bullied, adults first help him or her identify trusted adults at school. One adult is designated to receive reports of any additional bullying. Child and adult create a plan so that the child isn't alone in vulnerable situations, such as in the lunchroom and on the playground. These sessions often include

tutoring in friendship-making skills and assertiveness. The coach also reassures the child that the bullying behavior will be addressed.

Program Evaluation

Few studies have assessed the combined impact of a universal and selective intervention (Sprague, Nishioka and Stieber 2004). In this section, we describe the effects of the *Steps to Respect* program on children's playground behaviors, probably the most difficult area of the school for effecting change. First we describe the results at the 6-month posttest, then the results for a longitudinal sub-sample at the 18-month posttest. We next examine elements of the selective intervention: teacher feelings of preparedness to deal with bullying, their rate of student coaching, and the relationship of coaching to student playground behavior.

Impact of the Multilevel Program on Student Behavior

Six elementary schools were randomly assigned to either the intervention or control group. For 10 weeks in the fall and spring, coders who were blind to school condition conducted micro-analytic playground observations for a random sub-sample of 544 students. Behaviors (e.g., bullying, bystander encouragement, and agreeable and argumentative social behavior) were coded using a mutually exclusive system of categories. Bullying was defined as aggression that occurs in the context of a discernible power imbalance (e.g., an older child targeting a younger one) and/or repeated aggression toward a nonretaliating peer.

Group differences in student behaviors after six months
Students within classrooms share a common environment, resulting in error variances that are not independent. Analyses that controlled for class nesting examined changes in playground behavior from fall to spring (6-month posttest). These revealed that overall, playground bullying increased in control schools but not in program schools. Program students who bullied at pretest displayed a significant decrease in bullying behavior compared to the control group. Program students who engaged in destructive bystander behaviors at pretest, encouraging others to bully, also showed significant declines relative to the control group. Combined, these group differences represent about a 25 percent decline in bullying behaviors. We saw no group differences in non-bullying aggression at the 6-month posttest, although non-aggressive argumentative behavior declined in the intervention group.

Changes after eighteen months
A longitudinal sample consisting of children in grades 3 and 4 were followed over two school years (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom and Snell 2005). They received Level 1 of the classroom curricula in the first year, and Level 2 in grades 4 and 5. Analyses that controlled for class nesting showed substantial 18-month declines in antisocial playground behaviors, ranging from 32.2 percent to 78.0 percent. Table 1, next page, displays the means, expressed in rate per hour, for the pretest, 6-month posttest, and 18-month posttest.

Summary of program effects
The results of these two studies indicate encouraging results with respect to bullying and destructive bystander behaviors after only a six-month intervention. As schools persisted into a second year of intervention, reductions in bullying and destructive bystander behaviors strengthened, with the latter virtually disappearing. Significant declines in victimization were consistent with this pattern.

Reductions in non-bullying aggression were also visible for the first time at the 18-month posttest. This type of aggression is frequently elicited in response to bullying and is associated with continued victimization (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1996). Thus, these reductions may indicate that the program has started to change victim's reactions from a reliance on unregulated, aggressive responses to more effective, assertive responses.

Evaluation of the Selected Intervention Component

The training provided to teachers includes instruction and practice in using the coaching model when dealing with bullying incidents. After training, intervention teachers (n = 34) reported feeling significantly more prepared to deal with bullying than did control teachers (n = 35). Monthly self-report forms filled out by program teachers indicated how frequently they coached students involved in bullying incidents. Program teachers showed a near-significant (p < .06) increase in coaching after the start of *Steps to Respect* lessons from less than once a week to once or twice a week (Hirschstein and Frey, in press)

Teacher coaching and student playground behaviors
The relationship of teacher coaching to student outcomes was tested in intervention classrooms by examining rates of problem playground behaviors as a function of teachers' self-reported coaching efforts. Classrooms with the greatest declines in victimization and destructive bystander behaviors had teachers who engaged in more coaching of students involved in bullying (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell and MacKenzie 2005).

Among older students, more frequent teacher coaching predicted less non-bullying aggression. Although the program focus is on bullying behaviors, coaching sessions with victims of bullying would presumably have included the instruction and practice of non-aggressive responses to bullying. Since aggressive responses predict continued victimization (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1996), declining aggression may have also contributed to the decline in victimization.

Table 1. Observed playground behavior in the 18-month post-test sample

Observed behavior	Time Period Means and Standard Deviations		
	Pretest	6 mo posttest	18 mo posttest
	Means (sd)	*Means (sd)*	*Means (sd)*
Bullying	0.67 (1.14)	0.54 (1.23)	0.49 (0.91)
Victimization	0.57 (1.15)	0.46 (0.92)	0.36 (0.84)
Encouragement	0.54 (0.95)	0.32 (0.74)	0.15 (0.47)
Non-bullying aggression	1.40 (1.92)	1.12 (2.25)	0.89 (1.54)
Argumentative behavior	3.25 (3.01)	2.70 (2.68)	2.20 (2.59)
Agreeable behavior	41.01 (15.02)	43.11 (16.68)	40.60 (15.54)

Note: Means and standard deviations are based on rate per hour for all but argumentative and agreeable behavior. The latter are entered as percentage of observed time.

The Advantages of the Coaching Model for Selected Intervention

Coaching appears to be an important technique in the anti-bullying toolkit. The coaching model used in the *Steps to Respect* program provides a framework for school discipline that contrasts sharply with the punitive, high-stakes approaches common in many schools (e.g., "zero tolerance"). The *Steps to Respect* program, and the coaching model in particular, is aimed at developing a constructive partnership between adults and young people. The program teaches students to recognize and report bullying and trains staff to respond appropriately. Using coaching as the disciplinary framework provides four crucial advantages over a well-intentioned, but ultimately self-defeating high-stakes model:

Use of a coaching model encourages student reporting

Because bullying is a hidden event, adults are largely dependent on students to identify bullying, particularly bullying that is perpetrated by socially skilled students (Frey, in press). Students may be reluctant to report because of fear of retaliation and because they do not want to have a reputation as someone who "ratted on" a potentially popular student. A school response that is perceived as 'too big a deal' will discourage students from reporting. This is particularly true when abuse has been long-lasting, since victims often start to believe that they somehow deserve it (Juvonen, Nishina and Graham 2001). Parents and teachers may have even told the student that the events were inconsequential or "character-building." Thus, the student may well believe that suspension, for example, is too harsh a response for the abuse he's suffered, discouraging disclosure.

A coaching model results in a proportionate, consistent response

In order to forestall serious problems from developing, students need to experience consequences for low-level infractions. Adults need to provide constructive guidance that deters continuation of the behavior without stigmatizing the student. Contrast this to a high-stakes punishment model in which adults are backed into a corner. There are too many students engaged in bullying to suspend all the guilty parties. Therefore, discipline is applied inconsistently, depriving students of important education and guidance.

A coaching model saves time for adults

There is another reason that high-stakes models results in inconsistent discipline. Judith McBride, a school psychologist in Southern California, notes that with the possibility of serious consequences, educators must invest considerable time and effort to establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Many investigations fail to provide the requisite proof. Despite the time expended, adults are left in a relatively powerless position, and kids get away with bad behavior (personal communication, 2003). Clear evidence that a child is bullying may not occur until the behavior is well-entrenched. Again, the high-stakes punishment works against having a consistent response and intervening early. McBride contrasts that to a coaching approach. When kids protest, "I wasn't bullying," educators can proceed with coaching so that child will be able to avoid "even the appearance of bullying."

Coaching exemplifies the standards that educators wish to instill

Educators that use coaching make use of a powerful educational opportunity. Students are expected to generate positive solutions to bullying behavior, whether they are on the giving or receiving end. Students can receive individual coaching in making a strong, but calm response to provocation. Furthermore, when teachers coach those involved in bullying, they exemplify the expectation of positive goals and respectful interaction, standards that all educators want to instill in their students.

Conclusions

The *Steps to Respect* program combines universal interventions at the school and classroom levels with a selective intervention aimed at students involved in bullying events. Coaching of involved students appears to be a powerful technique when used as part of a multilevel intervention that targets schoolwide policies; adult awareness and intervention; and student skills, norms, and expectations. An unusually rigorous combination of a random control design, objective observations, and unbiased analytic techniques provides strong evidence of effectiveness for the *Steps to Respect* program. These positive results contrast with those in a recent review of 14 bullying programs. Smith and colleagues (Smith, Schneider, Smith and Ananiadou 2004) found minimal or no positive results on bullying in all but a few studies. In addition, the *Steps to Respect* program is the only study thus far to show effects on destructive bystander behaviors. Given the inappropriate encouragement these behaviors provide, the strong declines observed in these studies may be a hopeful sign of future declines in bullying.

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