

Bullying Prevention Through Enhancement of Social Behaviors: A Study of Canadian Elementary School Children

Peer victimization or bullying represents a decades-old practice in the elementary school population, which has been proven to be a direct cause of aggressive behaviors and emotional problems in children. After evaluating protective responses, researchers suggest that negative reactions to peer victimization are preventable.

Bullying occurs in many forms but somehow, has limited social responses. Based on the previous research of these social interactions the responses are mainly negative. To uncover the truth about how protective factors affect children's responses to peer victimization, researchers at University of Victoria's Department of Psychology conducted a 2-year study.

The study analyses how factors like prosocial leadership and social responsibility prevent and in some cases, reverse poor social behaviors. How are these factors implemented, do they work and most importantly, are children actually able to carry out these mediations without flaw or adult assistance? These are questions that the study aimed to answer, and has succeeded in finding out:

- The effects of prosocial leadership and social responsibility
- Children's capacity for prosocial leadership and social responsibility
- The effects of enhancing protective factors
- Implementation of children's intervention program strategies

Prosocial Leadership and Social Responsibility: Characteristics, Capacity, and Effects

Children initiating helpfulness and showing empathy (prosocial leadership) differ from other children. The characteristics that these empathetic children embody allows them to feel like they should intervene with bullying, but doesn't always give them the strength to act on that feeling.



Prosocial leadership, because of its one-sided view, can allow children to enhance their popularity, peer status, and social dominance. Therefore, kids who are prosocial can easily become bullies themselves. However, this is less likely to occur in children who also maintain the ability to be socially responsible.

Children who understand the importance of following the rules, trusting authority figures and supporting their peers are kids who possess social responsibility. Alone, socially responsible children may only seek help in cases of peer victimization. Children who have both prosocial leadership and social responsibility are likely to try to stop bullying on their own and even encourage other children to cease peer victimization.

Enhancing Protective Factors

Among elementary school children, there is a widespread desire for social status and some children may seek out this status by any means. For this reason, the study found that there are dangers to enhancing protective behaviors outside of peer conflicts.

Instead, the researchers have found that enhancing these factors by way of intervention programs that teach children to be helpful, caring and intervene as bystanders of peer victimization, is most effective.

Intervention Programs

Canadian students in grades 1 through 4 have been introduced to programs that are designed to help children deal with bullying. One program, WITS (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, and Seek Help) Leadership Program offers children a step-by-step process to confronting peer victimization. But, does it tackle the act of peer victimization itself?

“The idea is to teach kids about the internal worlds of other people and how people are hurt by this kind of meanness and what to do about it. We try to give children a broader sense of what counts as bullying and better ways to solve peer problems.” - [Bonnie J. Leadbeater, Professor of Psychology at University of Victoria](#)

Based on the study, yes, the WITS program successfully helps children to solve conflicts with their peers and teaches them to encourage other students to “use their WITS.” This program is one of many interventions, set in place by the British Columbia Ministry of Education. PREVNet (Promoting Relationships & Elimination Violence Network) has also shown success.

The outcomes of these intervention programs are constantly monitored and reported back to the education ministry through the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) and the Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ).

Next Steps for Preventing Aggression, Bullying and Emotional Dysfunction in Elementary School Children

The study had a few limitations, which included lack of diversity in race and location among its study subjects. Still, the study managed to inform on the effects of training and implementation of programs related to peer victimization.

Their results affirmed that the responsibility of reducing and preventing bullying rests on the shoulders of many. Even children themselves have a responsibility to intervene and to report cases of peer victimization. The researchers conclude that a systematic approach to enhancing protective factors amongst elementary school children can reveal ways to stop the development of psychopathology and the threatening behaviors that result from it.