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REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Bullying Prevention Unit

Overview

Experiences during the early school years lay the foundation for ongoing peer relationships, and for too many children, this can include a pattern of being bullied (Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005). The Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit, combined with Second Step Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), empowers schools to engage in comprehensive research-based bullying prevention, starting in kindergarten.

The Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit includes training and resources for school staff; classroom lessons, games, and activities; and Home Link materials for families. This review will explain how the Bullying Prevention Unit translates the research on bullying prevention into these multiple program components, which build on the foundation of Second Step SEL to give schools the tools they need to prevent bullying.

The Bullying Prevention Unit draws on bullying-related research from across the different stages of childhood. The majority of research on bullying has been done with upper-elementary or middle school students, but studies have clearly shown that the dynamics and nature of bullying in students as young as those in kindergarten and first grade mirror what takes place among older students (Estell, Cairns, Farmer, & Cairns, 2002; Hanish et al., 2005; Perren & Alsaker, 2006)..

The Steps to Respect Foundation

Committee for Children's Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program (Committee for Children, 2001) underwent the most rigorous evaluation of a school-based bullying prevention program done in the United States and was shown to be successful for reducing bullying while having a positive impact on the school environment at all levels (Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011). All of the components of the Steps to Respect program are included in the Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit.

The Social-Ecological Model

The Bullying Prevention Unit is designed to prevent bullying by changing multiple levels of the school ecology through intervention components that affect schools and classrooms, peer norms and behavior, and individual attitudes, norms, and skills. This social-ecological approach has strong support in the bullying prevention field (Espelage & Swearer, 2003) and is also the foundation for the Steps to Respect program. The different components of Second Step SEL and the Bullying Prevention Unit combine to influence the levels of the school social ecology in a variety of ways, discussed below

Second Step SEL

The Social-Emotional Learning Foundation

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs involve "the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments" (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009). The following sections describe research that shows how the social-emotional skills taught in Second Step provide a crucial foundation for bullying prevention.

Empathy

Second Step lessons focus on building empathy, which is related to both social competence and academic success. Being able to identify, understand, and respond to how someone is feeling provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior, friendships, cooperation, coping, and conflict resolution. Young children with higher levels of empathy tend to be less aggressive, better liked, more socially skilled, and more academically successful (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Denham, 2006; Izard, 2002; Katsurada & Sugawara, 1998).

Research indicates that children often think the reason other children are bullied is because they are different from them or from the perceived norm (Swearer & Cary, 2007). This suggests a lack of empathy for children who are bullied, and that could lead to students justifying it. On the other hand, children who are more empathically concerned about peer victimization are more likely to intervene to stop bullying (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008). Although empathy is a major focus of Second Step SEL, in the Bullying Prevention Unit students learn how to recognize bullying, and the lessons are specifically designed to enhance empathy for students who are bullied.

Perspective taking, an element of empathy taught in Second Step lessons, may help increase concern for peers. Students with perspective-taking skills are less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to peers (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Perspective-taking skills also make students more likely to offer emotional support to others (Carlo, Knight, Eisenberg, & Rotenberg, 1991; Litvack-Miller, McDougall, & Romney, 1997). Students who witness bullying are more likely to intervene if they have positive feelings and attitudes toward the victim (Rigby & Johnson, 2006–07).

Emotion Management

Emotion-management skills help children behave in socially skilled ways (Eisenberg et al., 1997). Children do a better job of managing peer conflicts when they can recognize their own emotions and calm themselves before reacting to situations. Students with poor emotion-management skills may have a harder time coping with peer challenges because they are prone to act impulsively on their emotions rather than using problem-solving skills, such as analyzing situations, anticipating consequences, and planning (Donohew et al., 2000; Simons, Carey, & Gaher, 2004). Students who lack emotional-regulation skills are more likely to bully others (Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003). Hyperactivity and emotional outbursts also make it more likely students will be victimized by their peers (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). When children respond to bullying with aggression or highly emotional reactions, those reactions tend to escalate and intensify the bullying (Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000).

On the other hand, being skilled at managing strong emotions, such as anger, embarrassment, anxiety, fear, and jealousy, can improve students' abilities to get along with peers and make good choices. Students being bullied can learn to use self-talk and other calming strategies to avoid crying, retaliating, or responding in other ways likely to mark them as easy targets for continued victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993).

Friendship Skills

Bullying is typically a social process that has a lot to do with the social status and peer relationships of students who experience bullying (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010). One way to protect children from bullying is to help them get along with peers and have more friends by increasing their friendship skills—an overarching goal of Second Step SEL. A lack of social skills increases students' risk of being bullied (Farmer et. al, 2010; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Being disliked, socially marginalized, or rejected by peers significantly increases a student's risk of being bullied (Cook et al., 2010; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Putallaz et. al., 2007). Victimized children tend to have fewer friends, and the friends they do have are also often victimized (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). This lack of peer support means other children are less likely to defend children who are bullied, making them easy targets and more vulnerable to emotional harm (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Slaby, 2005).

On the other hand, positive social relationships and social support protect students from peer victimization

(Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Hanish et al., 2005). Students who have at least one friend are less likely to be victimized by peers, and among bullied children, those who have a good friend experience less subsequent bullying and fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2007; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007).

Social skills also affect how students respond to bullying, which in turn can influence the extent to which they are victimized in the future. Research shows that responding aggressively to bullying can cause victimization to last longer or escalate (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Mahady Wilton et al., 2000). On the other hand, being passive and failing to defend or assert oneself is associated with being targeted for bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz et al., 1993). Learning social skills can help rejected children become more accepted by peers, less likely to be bullied, and more likely to be defended by peers (Pelligrini, 2002). Students who are able to use socially skilled responses to bullying, such as assertively and appropriately standing up for themselves, are more likely to be able to end the mistreatment (Mahady Wilton, et al., 2000). The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons build on the assertiveness skills taught in the Second Step program by showing students how to use them to refuse and report bullying.

Social Problem Solving and Assertiveness

To manage peer challenges effectively, students need to be able to assess social situations accurately and respond in thoughtful ways. Many children who are aggressive and bully others lack these skills. They often misread social situations and tend to jump to conclusions, see others as more hostile or aggressive than they are, and come up with fewer and more aggressive ideas about how to handle conflicts (Cook et. al., 2010; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1993; Olweus, 1993; Pelligrini, 2002; Rubin, Bream, & Rose-Krasnor, 1991).

Students who are bullied also may lack effective social problem-solving skills (Biggam & Power, 1999; Cook et al., 2010). Although research shows that bullied children most often respond in aggressive, retaliatory, or emotionally reactive ways to bullying, if they can use problem-solving strategies, it de-escalates conflicts 13 times more effectively (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000).

Victimized students who most commonly use passive strategies, such as avoiding, acquiescing to, or ignoring the person doing the bullying, can learn to respond more effectively by using assertive strategies, such as talking with others to find a solution or asking others for help (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000).

The Bullying Prevention Unit: Beyond Social-Emotional Learning

Research shows that effective bullying prevention requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond SEL (Farmer, 2000). A social-emotional skills-based approach should be accompanied by child- and adult- focused bullying-specific components designed to change the climate of the school and classroom and reduce the peer rewards that can otherwise reinforce the behavior of aggressive children (Farmer & Xie, 2007; Perren & Alsaker, 2006).

Peer-group behaviors have a strong influence on bullying and on students' willingness to intervene (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2011), and therefore prevention efforts need to target the individual and the larger peer group. In addition to SEL, bullying prevention requires addressing the school and classroom environment, educating students and staff about bullying, teaching students and staff how to respond effectively to bullying, and changing student and staff norms about bullying. This section describes the research that supports the ways in which the Bullying Prevention Unit is designed to accomplish these goals.

Student-Focused Content

The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons encourage specific, helpful bystander behaviors and positive student norms by teaching students to recognize, report, and refuse bullying. By learning to recognize bullying, students increase their awareness of the problem, learn to identify when they or others are being bullied, and increase their empathy for bullied students. Giving students a clear message to report bullying sets a positive norm, lets student who might bully know there will be consequences, and supports adults in their efforts to reduce bullying. Lessons on refusing bullying reinforce the message that bullying does not have to be tolerated and encourage students to report and use assertiveness skills to stand up to bullying.

Although building individual students' social-emotional skills contributes to bullying prevention, to be effective a program should also target the social environment and students' bullying-related attitudes and norms (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010). When bullying brings social rewards, it is unrealistic to expect students not to engage in it just because they have gained new social-emotional skills (Kärnä et al., 2010). It is also neither fair nor effective to expect children to stop others from bullying them by changing their own behavior or skills alone (Elledge et al., 2010). Social-skills training is most effective at reducing bullying when it is complemented by program components designed to improve the social environment, especially the way the larger population of children responds to bullying (Farmer, 2000).

Bullying is primarily a group phenomenon that involves students in multiple roles, particularly as bystanders—students who witness or are aware of bullying (Kärnä et al., 2010; Olweus, 1993). Being part of a peer group that engages in greater levels of bullying is highly predictive of an individual being less willing to intervene in bullying incidents (Espelage et al., 2011). The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons teach students skills and set norms for responding to bullying that they can use to respond more appropriately when they are bullied or when they are bystanders to bullying.

How bystanders react has a powerful influence on the prevalence of bullying. Students who witness bullying often look to others to decide how to respond, and the behavior of bystanders can easily support and reinforce bullying (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Bystanders can inadvertently encourage bullying by watching or laughing at it (Craig & Pepler, 1995). Unfortunately, without intervention or training, students most often either passively observe, actively encourage, or participate in bullying (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 1999; Slaby, 2005). However, research shows that bullying usually stops when bystanders intervene appropriately (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Salmivalli, 1999). The power of bystanders to support or discourage bullying means that influencing how bystanders respond is a critical part of bullying prevention (Kärnä et al., 2010; Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, Michiels, & Subramanian, 2008).

Research shows that appropriate lessons can reduce the bystander behaviors that support and perpetuate bullying and also increase students' sense of responsibility to help those who are victimized (Frey, et al., 2005). In a recent meta-analysis, programs that focus specifically on bystander intervention were shown to be quite efficacious (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). School and classroom climates that create disapproval of bullying can reduce bullying by creating a "social cost" for students who bully (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001). The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons draw on skills taught in Second Step SEL lessons and also specifically teach new skills to empower bystanders to be part of the solution to bullying rather than part of the problem of bullying.

The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons build skills specifically helpful in reducing bullying and help students learn how to apply social-emotional skills taught in Second Step SEL to bullying situations. Assertiveness is an important social-emotional skill that can help empower students who witness or experience bullying to respond effectively, whether that means getting other bystanders to walk away or not support bullying, reporting bullying to adults, or confronting bullying directly. The lessons also reinforce the friendship skills taught in Second Step SEL through an emphasis on including others and inviting others to join in activities, which, as discussed above, can reduce the social isolation that contributes to bullying.

Adult-Focused Content

The schoolwide components of the Bullying Prevention Unit provide staff with training and materials to support program implementation and help foster a positive school climate and positive norms for students and staff while dealing appropriately with bullying.

Leadership Training

Principal leadership is important to the success and effectiveness of school-based prevention programs (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2004; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). Building administrators can motivate staff to implement the program and make it clear that bullying prevention is a school priority.

School leaders are also responsible for ensuring that school policies are appropriate. Effective disciplinary

policies are an important part of bullying prevention (Ma, 2002). Studies of bullying prevention interventions have found that having rules against and consequences for bullying reduces both bullying and victimization (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Ttofi, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008). The Bullying Prevention Unit includes resources to help principals and ensure their schools anti-bullying policies and procedures are communicated effectively.

Staff Training

Teacher and staff training is focused on raising staff awareness of bullying, support for effective teaching, and instruction on how to recognize, respond to, and report bullying situations.

Research has shown that teachers tend to underestimate the extent and severity of bullying in their school (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001; Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002; Pervin & Turner, 1994), particularly in elementary schools (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). A study of the Committee for Children Steps to Respect bullying prevention program in 33 elementary schools found that students reported significantly more bullying of all types than teachers did and thought bullying was a more serious problem than teachers did (Low et al., 2011). Research has shown that teachers think they intervene more often than they actually do (Newman & Murray, 2005). Similar to previous research (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003), the Steps to Respect study also found that compared to teachers, students were much less con dent that school staff would help out in instances of bullying. These gaps between students' and teachers' perceptions can hamper bullying prevention efforts, and they highlight the importance of staff training. Training and resources in the Bullying Prevention Unit are designed to address these issues by educating teachers and other staff about how to recognize bullying so they can respond effectively.

The Bullying Prevention Unit lessons teach students to report bullying to staff. The ability of staff to intervene in bullying is strongly dependent on students' willingness to report incidents. When over 10,000 students were surveyed on responses to bullying, they reported that telling an adult at school was the second most effective strategy but only the ninth most commonly used (Davis & Nixon, 2010). Reporting is less likely when students do not believe staff take bullying seriously or do not trust staff to effectively intervene (Harris, Petrie, & Willoughby, 2002; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). If students trust that staff will intervene effectively, they should be more likely to report bullying. However, research shows that although most staff believe they have effective strategies for handling bullying situations, students often believe school staff interventions make bullying situations worse (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Taken together, these findings indicate that effective bullying prevention in schools includes educating teachers and other school staff on how to recognize the various forms of bullying and how to intervene effectively (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Espelage & Swearer, 2008).

Once students report bullying, school staff have to know how to deal appropriately with the students involved. The Bullying Prevention Unit also provides resources and specific training to help staff work effectively both with students who bully and students who are bullied.

Positive Relationships in the Classroom

The relationships among students and between students and teachers affect the classroom climate and have important impacts on bullying. Healthy relationships between students and teachers, and among students, help reduce bullying and relational aggression (Kuppens et al., 2008; Swearer, 2008) and reduce students' involvement in violence (Sprott, 2004). Teachers can support student success both socially and academically through providing emotional support to students, and the effects of that emotional support are greatest for more vulnerable or higher-risk students (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Sprott, 2004; Thomas, Bierman, Thompson, Powers, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2008). Higher levels of emotional support from teachers improve students' social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002; Wilson, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2007), reduce aggression (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009), and produce more positive behavior with peers (National Institute of Child Health & Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). Students are also less aggressive in classrooms where teachers strongly disapprove of aggression (Gest & Rodkin, 2011).

It is also important to create a classroom environment that supports help seeking on the part of students who are bullied (Leadbeater et al., 2003). The Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit encourages the development of healthy relationships and positive classroom climate through providing teachers with materials for positive relationship-building games and classroom meetings and support for both teaching and daily reinforcement of key interpersonal skills.

Summary

Patterns of peer rejection and victimization that are established early can harm children's development over the long term. Comprehensive bullying prevention requires a foundation of social-emotional learning, such as that provided by Second Step SEL, combined with strategies to address the school and classroom environment, educate students and staff about bullying, teach students and staff how to respond effectively to bullying, and change student and staff norms about bullying. The Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit, combined with Second Step SEL, empowers schools to engage in comprehensive research-based bullying prevention starting in kindergarten.

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