

# Research Brief

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## What Works for Bullying Programs:

LESSONS FROM  
EXPERIMENTAL  
EVALUATIONS  
OF PROGRAMS  
AND INTERVENTIONS

Elizabeth K. Lawner, B.A.  
and Mary A. Terzian, Ph.D.,  
M.S.W

Child Trends  
7315 Wisconsin Avenue  
Suite 1200 W  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Phone 240-223-9200

[childtrends.org](http://childtrends.org)



### OVERVIEW

The most commonly accepted definition of bullying is that it is a form of unprovoked, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance and is either repeated or has the potential to be repeated over time.<sup>1</sup>

This brief synthesizes findings from experimental evaluations of 17 bullying programs for children and/or youth to determine how frequently these programs work to improve the outcomes of physical and verbal bullying, social and relational bullying, bullying victimization, attitudes toward bullying, and being a bystander of bullying. Most of these programs served school-aged children; only two focused on children age five or younger.

### KEY FINDINGS

While the relatively small number of bullying program evaluations limits our ability to draw generalizations and conclusions, our review suggests a number of initial findings:

- Programs that involve parents were generally found to be effective.
- Programs that use a whole-school approach to foster a safe and caring school climate—by training all teachers, administrators, and school counselors to model and reinforce positive behavior and anti-bullying messages throughout the school year<sup>2</sup>—were generally found to be effective.
- We found mixed results for programs that included social and emotional learning, such as self-awareness, relationship skills, or responsible decision-making.

## BACKGROUND

Involvement in bullying—as the target, bystander, or perpetrator—is common among children and adolescents and has been found to vary by a number of factors, including age, race, gender, and whether one is transitioning from one school to another. For example, elementary and middle school students report being the targets and perpetrators of physical and verbal bullying more often than high school students. The prevalence of bullying is particularly high during school transitions, when students are forming cliques and establishing social hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> Overall, physical and verbal bullying is more commonly reported among males, while social or relational bullying is more commonly reported among females.<sup>4</sup> How often one is the target of bullying (bullying victimization) appears to vary by race and gender: white students more often report being the victims of bullying than racial/ethnic minority students, and females more often report being the victims of bullying than males. In addition, bullying victimization is more common among students who differ from conventional social norms. For example, recent surveys of national school climate found high rates of bullying victimization for all forms of bullying behavior among students aged 13 to 20 who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).<sup>5</sup> Overall, one-third of teens reported being bullied in school in 2009.<sup>6</sup>

In the past, bullying prevention programs have sought to deter more direct forms of verbal bullying (threats, insults, and attempts to intimidate and humiliate) and physical bullying (acts that inflict or threaten to inflict physical harm). Today, many recognize that acts of social or relational bullying, both direct and indirect, can be just as harmful to victims. Examples of social or relational bullying include leaving someone out on purpose, telling others not to befriend someone, spreading rumors about someone, and embarrassing someone in public.<sup>7</sup>

## ABOUT THE STUDY

This Child Trends research brief synthesizes lessons learned from experimental evaluations of 17 bullying programs located in Child Trends' What Works LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully) database of social interventions designed for children and youth. Evaluations were selected if they assessed impacts on any of the five outcomes described below:

- **BULLYING<sup>i</sup>** – physical and verbal behaviors designed to threaten or inflict physical or emotional harm
- **SOCIAL OR RELATIONAL BULLYING** – bullying behaviors intended to raise one's social status, lower another's social status, or manipulate peer or romantic relationships
- **BULLYING VICTIMIZATION** – being the target of bullying
- **BEING A BYSTANDER OF BULLYING** – passively witnessing or tolerating bullying behavior
- **ATTITUDES TOWARD BULLYING** – how children view bullying behaviors

This review does not focus on the magnitude of the impacts found, but rather the number of statistically significant impacts on a measure of bullying-related outcomes for children or youth.

The impacts of the programs reviewed for this brief are reported in the following categories:

- **FOUND TO WORK:** Programs in this category have positive and statistically significant impacts on at least one bullying outcome.
- **MIXED FINDINGS:** Programs in this category have varied impacts on particular outcomes, either at different times, for different subgroups, or in different evaluations. For example, a program that

i The construct of “bullying” has recently been expanded by researchers and policymakers to include social and relational forms of bullying; however, we chose to apply a more narrow definition, to make it more consistent with traditional or mainstream applications of this term.

results in significant improvements in bullying at post-test but has no impact at a one-year follow-up would be rated as having “mixed findings.” A program that works for one subgroup of participants but not for another subgroup would also receive a “mixed findings” rating. A program that has positive impacts in one evaluation but not in a second evaluation would also receive a “mixed findings” rating.

- **NOT FOUND TO WORK:** Programs in this category have non-significant or marginally significant impacts on the majority of bullying outcomes assessed.

## FINDINGS

Overall, 8 of the 17 programs found a positive impact on at least one bullying-related outcome (were “found to work”). With respect to the specific outcomes:

- Four out of 15 programs found a positive impact on bullying perpetration.
- No programs had a positive impact on social or relational bullying.
- Three out of 12 programs found a positive impact on bullying victimization, that is, reduced reports of bullying behavior.
- Two out of 5 programs found a positive impact on being a bystander of bullying.
- One out of 4 programs found a positive impact on attitudes toward bullying, but that program had no impacts or mixed impacts on all other bullying-related outcomes.

(Note that the specific programs that have positive, mixed, and null findings for each outcome category are depicted in the table at the end of this brief.)

Due to the limited number of programs, we based the effectiveness of a particular approach on whether the program worked for any of these five outcomes categories. Below, we identify several promising approaches, with an important caveat that because the number of programs in each category is small, all findings presented in this synthesis should be considered preliminary.

### ■ FOUND TO WORK:

**Involving Parents.** Programs that involved parents in some way, by delivering parent education about bullying or by encouraging them to speak with their children about bullying, for example, were generally found to be effective for bullying outcomes. Six<sup>ii</sup> of the seven programs that involved parents worked for at least one bullying outcome, and the seventh program had mixed findings. Two programs included parent meetings, either in the form of family therapy or information sessions for parents. Other types of parent involvement included sending guides home to parents with instructions on how to reinforce what children were learning in program sessions.

**Implementing a Whole-School Approach.** A whole school approach to improve school climate is one that trains all teachers, administrators, and school counselors to model and reinforce positive behavior and anti-bullying messages throughout the school year.<sup>8</sup> Programs that used a whole-school approach were frequently found to be effective for bullying outcomes. Of the seven programs that used a whole-school approach, five<sup>iii</sup> of them worked for at least one bullying outcome, while two had mixed results.

**Both Involving Parents and Implementing a Whole-School Approach.** Programs that used involved parents and implemented a whole-school approach were also generally found to be effective. Five<sup>iv</sup> of the six programs that involved parents and implemented a whole-school approach worked for at least one bullying outcome, and the sixth program had mixed findings.

ii Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Resolve It, Solve It, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

iii Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

iv Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

#### ■ MIXED FINDINGS:

**Teaching Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills.** Promoting SEL skills—like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, or responsible decision-making—is considered a best practice for bullying prevention. This review, though, obtained mixed findings for rigorously evaluated programs that included an SEL component. Of the fourteen programs that included a social and emotional learning focus, seven<sup>v</sup> had a positive impact on at least one bullying outcome, six had mixed findings, and one did not work for any bullying outcomes. In addition, programs targeting two of the specific SEL skills were associated with mixed impacts, while the other three also seemed to have mixed impacts, but were not used in enough programs to draw conclusions (see also “Needed Research” section).

#### Specific SEL skills include:

- **Teaching Social Awareness.** Social awareness involves perspective-taking, empathy, understanding behavior norms, and recognizing resources and supports available from friends and family and in school and the community.<sup>9</sup> Of the eight programs that taught social awareness, three<sup>vi</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, while five had mixed findings.
- **Teaching Relationship Skills.** Relationship skills involve clear communication, active listening, cooperation, resisting social pressure, conflict negotiation, and seeking and offering help.<sup>10</sup> Of the eleven programs that taught relationship skills, six<sup>vii</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, while four had mixed findings and one did not work for any bullying outcome.

**Teaching Empathy for Victims.** Of the eight programs that taught empathy for victims or aimed to improve bystander behavior, four<sup>viii</sup> had positive impacts on at least one bullying outcome, while four had mixed impacts.

**Using a “Universal” Approach.** A universal approach is one that targets all children, with and without problems with bullying or victimization. Of the thirteen programs that used a universal approach, six<sup>ix</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, five had mixed findings, and two did not work for any bullying outcome.

**Working with Elementary School Children.** Of the thirteen programs for children six to eleven years old, six<sup>x</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome and seven had mixed findings.

**Working with Adolescents.** Of the seven programs for adolescents 12 to 17 years old, three<sup>xi</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, three had mixed findings, and one did not work for any bullying outcomes.

v Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Resolve It, Solve It, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

vi KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, and Steps to Respect

vii Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Resolve It, Solve It, and Steps to Respect

viii Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, and Steps to Respect

ix Friendly Schools Program, Positive Action, P4, Resolve It, Solve It, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

x Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, P4, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

xi Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Resolve It, Solve It, and Success in Stages

**Delivering a Longer-term Program.** Of the twelve programs that were at least twelve weeks long, seven<sup>xii</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, while five had mixed findings. Of the five programs that lasted less than 12 weeks, only one worked for at least one bullying outcome, two had mixed findings, and two did not work for any bullying outcome.

**Delivering at Least 10 Sessions.** Of the ten programs with at least 10 sessions, five<sup>xiii</sup> worked for at least one bullying outcome, four had mixed findings, and one did not work for any bullying outcome. Of the seven programs that had fewer than 10 sessions, four worked for at least one bullying outcome, two had mixed findings, and one did not work for any bullying outcome.

#### ■ NEEDED RESEARCH:

The number of bullying programs evaluated using an experimental design and intent-to-treat approach has grown, albeit slightly, over the past decade. However, with only 17 programs with rigorous evaluations, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about whether certain approaches work. Approaches meriting further research are noted below.

#### Approaches Related to Intervention Model

**Teaching Self-Awareness.** Self-awareness is an element of social and emotional learning, and it involves recognizing one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior.<sup>11</sup> Only one program taught self-awareness, and it was found to have mixed impacts.

**Teaching Self-Management Skills.** Self-management is another element of social and emotional learning, and it involves the effective regulation of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Of the four programs that taught self-management, two had positive impacts on at least one bullying outcome, and two had mixed impacts.

**Teaching Responsible Decision-Making.** Another aspect of social and emotional learning is responsible decision-making. This involves considering ethics, safety, social norms, the realistic consequences of actions, and the well-being of self and others when making decisions about behavior and social interactions.<sup>13</sup> Of the four programs that taught responsible decision-making, two worked for at least one bullying outcome, and two had mixed findings.

**Rewarding Positive Behavior.** Only two programs were designed to reward positive peer-directed behavior. One of these programs worked for at least one bullying outcome, while the other did not.

**Incorporating Peer Educators.** Despite the importance of peers in adolescence, only two of the programs incorporated peer educators. One of these programs worked for at least one bullying outcome, while the other had mixed findings.

**Targeting Hotspots.** Research suggests that much bullying behavior occurs in “hotspots”— areas with low levels of adult supervision, such as a playground, bus, or cafeteria. Only one program targeted a hotspot. This program was found to have a positive impact on at least one bullying outcome.

#### Approaches Related to Target Population

**Using a Tiered Approach.** A multi-tiered approach involves having one or more universal components that are delivered to all children, as well as components that are delivered only to children who have problems with bullying or victimization. Only two programs used a multi-tiered approach. One program had a positive impact on at least one bullying outcome, while the other had mixed impacts.

xii Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Friendly Schools Program, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Resolve It, Solve It, Steps to Respect, and Success in Stages

xiii Brief Strategic Family Therapy, KiVa Anti-bullying Program, Positive Action, Resolve It, Solve It, and Steps to Respect

**Using an “Indicated” Approach.** Indicated approaches target children who engage in bullying or experience victimization. Two programs using this approach were identified. One worked for at least one bullying outcome and the other had mixed findings.

**Intervening Early.** Only two programs served children five years old or younger. One of these programs had mixed findings, while the other did not work for any bullying outcome.

## DISCUSSION

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The proportion of students who report being the victim, bystander, or perpetrator of bullying in schools has been relatively stable in recent years. However, cyberbullying has increased significantly over the same time span, meaning that bullying is extending beyond school grounds.<sup>14</sup> Information about research-informed strategies for addressing bullying is just now beginning to accumulate, as we collect evaluation data from state and federal initiatives to promote safe and supportive schools. Moreover, only a limited number of rigorously-evaluated, evidence-based bullying prevention programs exist and those that do are not widely disseminated. In lieu of a strong evidence base, developing evidence-informed practices from research and practice is critical.<sup>15</sup>

Our review suggests that certain intervention approaches may be more effective than others. Promising approaches included involving parents and using a whole-school approach to foster a caring and safe school climate. Further research is needed to determine whether programs that teach self-awareness and self-management, target a hotspot, use a multi-tiered or indicated approach, and/or serve younger children are also effective for bullying outcomes.

This brief reviewed 17 programs with rigorous, random assignment studies that assessed outcomes related to bullying involvement. Of these, 8 were found to have positive impacts on at least one bullying outcome, 7 had mixed findings, and 2 were found to have non-significant effects. Due to the small number of evaluations reviewed, an examination of program approaches by outcome was not tenable. As the evidence base grows, it will be easier to identify strategies specifically tailored to specific outcomes, such as reducing the likelihood of being bullied or of engaging in social or relational bullying.

Bullying Programs	IMPACT OF BULLYING OUTCOME					Comments
	Bullying	Social or Relational Bullying	Bullying Victimization	Being a Bystander of Bullying	Attitudes Toward Bullying	
<b>Brief Strategic Family Therapy</b> is a family therapy program for adolescents	✓					
<b>Bulli and Pupe</b> is an Italian school-based bullying program for middle and high school students.	±		±			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on bullying for students in the last year of middle school or first year of high school, but not for those in the first two years of middle school</li> <li>positive impact on victimization for students in the last year of middle school or first year of high school, but not for those in the first two years of middle school</li> </ul>
<b>CAPSLE</b> is a school-based bullying program for elementary school students	±		±	±	✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on peer-reported bullying, but not self-reported bullying.</li> <li>positive impact on peer-reported, but not self-reported, victimization</li> <li>positive impact on aggressive bystanding, but not helpful bystanding</li> <li>no impact on believing that aggression is legitimate</li> </ul>
<b>The Early Childhood Friendship Project</b> is a school-based bullying program for preschool students	✗	✗	✗			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no impact on observed physical aggression</li> <li>no impact on observed relational aggression</li> <li>no impact on observed physical or relational victimization</li> </ul>
<b>The Flemish Anti-Bullying Intervention</b> is a school-based bullying program for primary and secondary school students.	±		✗			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on bullying for primary school students, but not secondary school students.</li> </ul>
<b>The Friendly Schools Program</b> is an Australian school-based bullying program for primary school students	✗		±	✓		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no impact on the frequency of bullying other students</li> <li>positive impact on being bullied in 4th grade and being bullied regularly in 6th grade, but no impact on being bullied in 5th or 6th grade or being bullied regularly in 4th and 5th grade</li> <li>positive impact on seeing another student being bullied</li> </ul>
<b>The KiVa Anti-Bullying Program</b> is a Finnish school-based program.	±		✓	±	±	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on self-reported bullying, but no impact on peer-reported bullying.</li> <li>positive impact on both peer-reported and self-reported victimization</li> <li>positive impact on peer-reported defending at wave 2, but not at wave 3, and it had a positive impact on peer-reported assisting and enforcing at wave 3</li> <li>positive impact on attitudes toward bullying at wave 2, but not at wave 3</li> </ul>
<b>Positive Action</b> is a school-based program designed to reduce behavior problems.	✓					

✓ FOUND TO WORK

✗ NOT FOUND TO WORK

± MIXED FINDINGS

Bullying Programs	IMPACT OF BULLYING OUTCOME					Comments
	Bullying	Social or Relational Bullying	Bullying Victimization	Being a Bystander of Bullying	Attitudes Toward Bullying	
<p><b>PRAISE</b> is a school-based program primarily for low-income, urban, African-American elementary school students.</p>	+	+				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on overt aggression for girls with high baseline aggression, but not for girls with low baseline aggression or boys' aggression in another study</li> <li>positive impact on relational aggression for girls, but not for boys</li> </ul>
<p><b>P4</b> is a puppet show that teaches students about bullying.</p>			✓			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on self-report of being bullied</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resolve It, Solve It</b> is a school- and community-based media campaign to reduce violence and aggression.</p>	✓		+			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on physical aggression against people</li> <li>positive impact on verbal victimization, but only a marginal impact on physical victimization</li> </ul>
<p><b>Roots of Empathy</b> is a school-based program to increase social-emotional competence in elementary and middle school students.</p>		+				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on teacher-rated indirect aggression, but not student-rated indirect aggression</li> </ul>
<p><b>Short Anti-Bullying Video Intervention</b> is designed to change peer norms among secondary school students.</p>	✗				✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no impact on the tendency to bully other pupils</li> </ul>
<p><b>S.S. GRIN</b> is a social skills program for elementary school students with peer relationship problems.</p>			+			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on victimization for aggressive students and girls, but not non-aggressive students or boys in one study, and had no impact on victimization in the other study</li> </ul>
<p><b>Steps to Respect</b> is a school-based bullying program for elementary school students.</p>	+	+	✗	✗	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on observations of bullying, but no impact on self-reported direct aggression</li> <li>positive impact on exclusionary gossip in one study, but no impact on indirect aggression in another study</li> <li>only a marginal impact on observations of encouraging bullying</li> <li>positive impact on feeling responsibility to intervene in bullying and decreased acceptance of bullying</li> </ul>
<p><b>Success in Stages</b> is an interactive computer program to decrease and prevent bullying.</p>	✓		✓	✓		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on being a passive bystander</li> </ul>
<p><b>Youth Matters</b> is a school-based bullying program for upper elementary school students</p>	✗		+			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>positive impact on victimization using one method of data analysis, but not another at post-test, and had no impact on victimization at the 12-month follow-up</li> </ul>

✓ FOUND TO WORK

✗ NOT FOUND TO WORK

± MIXED FINDINGS

#### ENDNOTES

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