



Understanding and Addressing the Early Childhood Origins of “Mean” Behavior and Bullying: Resources for Practitioners

Based on a longer report:
Bullies in the Block Area:
The Early Childhood Origins
of “Mean” Behavior

Child Trends

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OVERVIEW

To date, little attention has been given to the relationship between early childhood experiences and bullying behaviors later in life. Understanding the existing body of research on bullying in older children and youth is critically important to efforts to reduce bullying, yet the factors that contribute to a child’s engaging in bullying behaviors are likely experienced earlier in life. In fact, studies show that the spontaneous demonstration of bullying behavior among school-aged children is highly unlikely (Nagin & Tremblay, 1999; Broidy, Nagin, Tremblay, Bates, Brame, Dodge, Ferguson, et al., 2003), and the precursors of bullying behavior can be seen already in early childhood (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011). We may be missing an important opportunity to identify and address the antecedents of bullying before these behaviors become organized and intentional (Fraser, Lee, Kupper, & Day, 2010; Storey & Slaby, 2013; Tremblay, et al., 2010).

This brief first provides a summary of the developmental trajectory to bullying behavior and theories about social and environmental contributors to bullying. The remainder summarizes promising strategies and evidence-based intervention models designed to prevent bullying by addressing factors that contribute to the development of “mean” behavior and aggression in early childhood.

WHAT IS BULLYING, AND WHEN DOES IT BEGIN?

Among school-aged children, bullying is characterized by: (1) aggressive behavior (2) that is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, and (3) that reflects an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Gladden et al., 2013). Existing research articulates that a young child’s aggressive behaviors become more organized into bullying-like behavior during the preschool years. These behaviors are similar to bullying in many ways but do not consistently adhere to the criteria used to define bullying among school-aged children. For example, bullying behavior among very young children may not be carried out consistently over time, or the dynamic between the two children or groups of children may not reflect a consistent imbalance of power (Lamb, Pepler, & Craig, 2009). Bullying behaviors in early childhood may not be as systematic, consistent, or organized as those of a school-aged child, which suggests that labeling a behavior as bullying in early childhood may be inappropriate or even inaccurate (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003).

Since the term “bullying” is specifically defined for behaviors associated with school-aged children, the development of *aggression* or “mean” behavior, and how it becomes organized into bullying behavior, may be a better frame for examining early warning signs among young children (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003; VanderVen, 2015).

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF BULLYING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

Bullying can pose a serious threat to children’s immediate and long-term health and well-being, and can have profound impacts on all children involved in bullying behaviors, whether as the one bullying others, the one being bullied, or the one witnessing bullying. At least some of the roots of bullying behaviors, and conversely the roots of positive pro-social skills, can likely be found in adverse and positive experiences from early childhood, yet the research literature on these connections is limited. The early childhood field lacks a coherent, theoretical model that identifies the factors contributing to aggressive or “mean” behavior in young children, and establishes the developmental link between this early behavior and later bullying behavior.

Here we summarize findings from a review of the literature presented in Child Trends white paper *Bullies in the Block Area: The Early Childhood Origins of “Mean” Behavior*, which finds a substantial body of evidence lending support to the following theories:

- **Parenting behavior and characteristics**, particularly parenting style, parental involvement, and engagement are related to the development of aggressive or “mean” behaviors (Curtner-Smith, 2000; Troy & Stroufe, 1987; Vaillancourt, Miller, Fagbemi, & Tremblay, 2007; Zimmerman, Glew, Christakis, and Katon, 2005). However, the majority of research has focused on the role of the mother rather than the father.
- **Early childhood maltreatment**, such as physical abuse, is a significant predictor for involvement in bullying both as the target and as the aggressor (Teisl & Cicchetti, 2008; Vandenberg & Marsh, 2009). Early and persistent maltreatment is also shown to physically alter the structure of a child’s brain, which can lead to developmental deficits, including in social and emotional domains (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009).
- **The quantity and content of television media exposure** have been linked to both the development of bullying behaviors as well as pro-social skills (Levin, 2013; Mares & Woodard, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Increased exposure to media, including media that is not inherently violent, has been linked to increases in bullying behavior (Ostrov, Gentiel, & Crick, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2005). Conversely, exposure to television shows, such as *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* or *Sesame Street*, which are specifically designed to focus on pro-social skills, has been shown to increase these behaviors in young children (Friedrich & Stein, 1973; Zielinska & Chambers, 1995).

Evidence is limited and/or mixed for the connection between bullying behaviors and caregiver-child attachment, the influence of early care and education settings, the effects of early exposure to bias and prejudice, and other environmental factors such as peers or socioeconomic status. Further research is needed to understand how these factors contribute to the development of bullying behaviors from early childhood.

Future research must also continue to explore the slippery slope of the terminology used to describe “mean” behavior and aggression, being careful not to conflate typical social, emotional, and behavioral norms with signs and behaviors that suggest a child may be at risk of later bullying behavior or

victimization. While researchers continue to disentangle these many considerations, this brief presents several options available to practitioners now to help them support children by promoting positive relationships and fostering desirable, or “pro-social,” behaviors and skills.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT BULLYING PERPETRATION AND VICTIMIZATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

The early years present a unique opportunity to take advantage of a variety of caregiver-child relationships and social settings (at home, in preschools, child care settings, playgrounds, etc.), in which modeling, teaching, and reinforcing pro-social behaviors, empathy, and kindness can take place. Current evidence stresses the need to focus on promoting positive social and emotional skills and interactions to help prevent later bullying behaviors. There are both promising practices and evidence-based programs and resources that can help facilitate these skills in early childhood. The strategies presented here are focused on promoting protective factors and contexts for young children. A broader, more societal shift will likely be needed to address the contextual risk factors discussed in more depth in the report accompanying this brief.ⁱ

Promising practices and strategies for early childhood care and education settings

“You Can’t Say You Can’t Play”: This innovative approach devised by Vivian Gussin Paley, a former preschool and kindergarten teacher, aims to prevent exclusionary play behaviors in preschoolers by changing the attitudes of the classroom as a whole, rather than focusing on the behaviors of individual children (VanderVen, 2015). In her book *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (1993), Paley writes of the emotional struggles of excluded children, describes the origins of her idea to implement a rule in her preschool classroom that children are not allowed to exclude other children from their play activities, and reports on the positive changes she observed in the children and class dynamic. A small-scale evaluation of an intervention centered around *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (Harrist and Bradley, 2003) found mixed results (i.e., child reports from intervention classrooms were more positive than in control classrooms, but teacher reports and observations showed no significant differences). Paley’s approach has been lauded by early childhood practitioners as a successful way to promote inclusive and prosocial classroom interactions among children. Its popularity and wide usage among practitioners suggest that further evaluation of *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* on larger scale would be a valuable contribution to the field.

Promoting safe and welcoming classrooms: A number of practitioner guides and resources are available to help promote supportive classroom environments that prevent bullying and engender safe, welcome settings for all children. These include:

- *The Anti-Bullying and Teasing Book for Preschool Classrooms* (Sprung, Froschl, & Hinitz, 2005), based on the ideas Paley put forth in *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (1993).
- *Eyes on Bullying in Early Childhood* (Storey & Slaby, 2013; <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/preventing-bullying-in-early-childhood>), designed to help early childhood educators identify, prevent, or de-escalate bullying among their students and instead foster positive interactions. A toolkit designed for parents, caregivers, educators, and healthcare providers who work with children and youth (<http://www.eyesonbullying.org/pdfs/toolkit.pdf>) is also available.
- *Welcoming Schools* (<http://www.welcomingschools.org/>), developed by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, tackles the roots of bullying embedded in bias toward the many types of diversity found in our communities, including LGBT families and individuals.

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Guidance and problem-solving: Another practitioner resource focused on promoting prosocial, positive development in young children is the “*Guidance Matters*” column in the journal *Young Children* (published on the National Association for the Education of Young Children website). Columns that may be of particular interest to early childhood education practitioners seeking strategies to prevent and address bullying or pre-bullying behavior in their classrooms include:

- “Fostering Resilience: Teaching social-emotional skills” (http://www.naeyc.org/yc/files/yc/file/201407/YC0714_Guidance_Matters.pdf)
- “Aggression, the Prequel: Preventing the need” (http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201111/Guidance%20Matters_Online_1111.pdf)
- * “Swearing and Words That Hurt” (<http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200711/BTJGuidance.pdf>)
- * “Understand Bullying” (https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200805/BTJ_Guidance_Bullying.pdf)

The last column, “Understand Bullying” (Gartrell and Gartrell, 2008), argues that addressing and preventing bullying or other mean/aggressive behaviors in the early childhood classroom should be proactive and comprehensive (rather than limited to addressing isolated incidences). Establishing a culture of respect in the classroom that recognizes and celebrates individual differences and commonalities is important for preventing and mitigating bullying, they note, as well as for addressing the underlying emotional causes behind acts of bullying in individual children. Gartrell and Gartrell (2008) also advise teachers to address incidents of bullying by helping the children involved find alternative resolutions to conflict that are more socially responsible, and to seek insight into the underlying causes behind the bullying that may be unrelated to the situation in which aggression was carried out.

Promoting kindness and compassion: In concert with research indicating the potentially negative influence that media may have on the behavior of young children, of particular interest to the early childhood community may be the work of The Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, at St. Vincent College (VanderVen, 2015). The Center’s website features a blog and several publications discussing the developmentally appropriate uses of media in early childhood, with an emphasis on using media to establish interpersonal connections. The mission of the Center and the blog speaks to a broader emphasis on social and emotional development in young children, or, as they note on their home page (www.fredrogerscenter.org) “to focus on helping children grow as confident, competent, and caring human beings.”

The topic of engendering kindness and compassion in children has also gained traction in the early childhood field. The *Making Caring Common Project* at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education presents five strategies for raising “moral, caring children,” including prioritizing care for others and providing opportunities for children to practice these desired behaviors. Taken as a whole, there are a growing number of resources available through the mainstream media for parents, caregivers, and others interested in promoting and supporting the development of empathy and compassion in young children.

Evidence-based early childhood programs

This section briefly describes five evidence-based early childhood programs that help address or prevent risk factors for bullying in young children (birth to age eight). Summaries of their evidence base are provided in the full report.ⁱⁱ

Al’s Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices: Al’s Pals (see <http://wingspanworks.com/healthy-al/>) is a comprehensive curriculum and training program for teachers of children ages three to eight. Al’s Pals teaches children to express feelings appropriately, control impulses, show empathy, establish friendships, and solve problems peacefully. Al’s Pals helps children on the receiving end of bullying by giving them the skills to assert themselves, and encourages potential passive bystanders to care about the feelings of others and not tolerate hurtful behavior.

Incredible Years: The Incredible Years Series (see <http://incredibleyears.com/>) is a set of training programs designed for parents and teachers, and children ages birth to 12 years, to help children with ADHD or conduct/behavioral disorders.

- **For parents:** The “BASIC” parenting programs target four key timeframes in a child’s development: birth to eight months, one to three years, three to six years, and six to 12 years. The goals of the parenting programs are to improve parent-child interactions, build positive relationships and attachment, and improve parenting skills related to nurturing, communication, and problem solving. Parents can also participate in “ADVANCE” topical learning modules designed to address depression and anger management, develop attentive parenting skills, and build skills to support their child’s school readiness.
- **For children:** There are two programs for children: a small group program for children ages four to eight, and a classroom-based “Child Dinosaur” program for children ages three to eight. Both programs are designed to reduce early childhood aggression and promote pro-social behavior, social-emotional development, and problem solving and communication skills.
- **For teachers:** Teachers of young children can also participate in a classroom management program. The goal of the teacher program is to improve teacher-student relationships, and to support teachers in developing proactive classroom management skills and effective communication skills with families.

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) for Preschool: The *PATHS* curriculum (see <http://www.pathseducation.com/what-is-paths/paths-curriculum>) is a comprehensive, preventive program that promotes emotional and social competencies, aimed at reducing aggression and behavior problems in children from preschool through elementary school, while also enhancing the educational process in the classroom. The *PATHS* Preschool/Kindergarten curriculum, designed for children three to six years of age, supports the development of self-control, positive self-esteem, emotional awareness, basic problem-solving skills, social skills, and friendships. The curriculum is designed for educators and counselors to be used over time in a multi-year, universal prevention model. *PATHS* is primarily focused on the school and classroom settings; however, information and activities are also provided for use with parents.

Raising Safe Kids: The Adults and Children Together Against Violence Raising Safe Kids (see <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/>) program teaches positive parenting skills to parents and caregivers of children from birth to age eight. Raising Safe Kids is primarily designed for families at risk for child maltreatment, to promote positive parenting approaches for the success of the family and the long-term success of the child. The intervention focuses on positive parenting strategies also as a method for reducing children’s externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and bullying.

Second Step: Second Step (see <http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step>) is a universal classroom-based social-skills program for children ages four to 14. The program teaches socioemotional skills with the goal

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of reducing impulsive and aggressive behavior while increasing social competence. Children are taught to identify and manage their own emotions as well as to understand others' emotions. Second Step guides children to reduce impulsiveness and emotion-driven decision making, while also teaching them to set positive goals. The Second Step model combines cognitive behavioral intervention models with social learning theory, empathy research, and social information-processing theories. The program is implemented through school curricula, parent training, and skill development.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

This brief provides a short summary of risk factors in early childhood for later involvement in bullying, and then summarizes a variety of specific strategies, interventions, and guidance for addressing and preventing aggressive behavior in young children. There are a number of evidence-based approaches that have been found to be effective in addressing aggression in early childhood, as well as promising practices and strategies for teachers, parents, and other caregivers to promote prosocial, compassionate behavior in children. Ideas for classroom interventions and activities described above provide early childhood educators with strategies for age-appropriate activities designed to prevent exclusion and other “mean” behaviors. In addition, online resources from organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children help translate research into practice tips, and put forth innovative strategies for problem solving with children.

Based on the robust support of the research for an association between a child's relationship with his or her caretakers and subsequent or later “mean,” aggressive, or bullying behavior, interventions with young children, particularly in the context of early childhood education and care settings, should include a keen focus on improving, strengthening, or maintaining these essential relationships. It is our hope that this resource guide and the accompanying report may serve as a starting point for experts and practitioners in the field who are seeking to better understand the developmental trajectory of bullying and its root causes, and respond with effective and innovative approaches.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on this publication. Has it helped you or your organization? Email us at feedback@childtrends.org.

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