

[INSIGHTS]

FRIENDLY SCHOOLS: A WHOLE-SCHOOL INTERVENTION TO REDUCE BULLYING

School bullying seriously affects young people's social, physical and psychological well-being as well as their academic achievement.

Increasingly, evidence suggests whole-school (universal) interventions are the most effective, non-stigmatizing means to reduce bullying. These programmes encourage the active participation of parents, students, teachers and the wider school community, to plan, implement and evaluate school policies, procedures, teaching and learning and professional development (Cross et al, 2003).

KEY POINTS

The student cohort (10 years of age when the study began) who received the FS programme for three years were significantly:

1 *less likely to report being bullied* than non-intervention students after 12 and 36 months;

2 *more likely to tell someone if they were bullied* than non-intervention students after 12 months; and

3 *less likely to observe bullying* in the school than non-intervention students after 12, 24 and 36 months.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

1 The FS whole-school resources appear to successfully reduce the extent to which primary school students experience and observe bullying.

2 The FS whole-school resources can increase the extent to which primary school students tell someone if they are being bullied.

3 Students who bully others may require individualised support and targeted intervention, in addition to whole-school strategies, to change their behaviour.

THE RESEARCH

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

The FS Project was a two-year group randomized controlled trial with a one-year follow-up, conducted in over 90 classes randomly drawn from 29 metropolitan government primary schools in Perth, Western Australia. All schools were also randomly assigned to the intervention or comparison condition. Grade 4 students were tracked for three years from April 2000 to November 2002. Grade 4 students in 15 schools received the intervention and the remaining 14 acted as a comparison condition, with standard government health education curriculum and bullying policy and practice (approximately three hours in each school year of activities specifically related to bullying prevention and social skill development).

After being given a definition and pictures describing bullying behaviour, students completed a questionnaire which measured: how often students were bullied last term at school; how often students bullied others on their own or with a group last term at school; whether they told someone if they were bullied; whether they saw a student in the same year or younger being bullied at school last term.

THE FS INTERVENTION

The FS resources were designed using a whole-school approach to help build students' social competence and to enhance their relationships. They were also designed to reduce the occurrence of bullying behaviour, and to reduce the harm students may experience from bullying. The intervention was based on the Principles of Successful Practice for Bullying Reduction in Schools developed by this research team in 1999 (Cross et al, 2004).

To strengthen the intervention's scientific foundation and utility for teachers, its formative development was iterative and actively involved students and teachers similar to but not part of the study cohort in the design and pilot testing of its components.

The FS programme used three levels of intervention to involve:

- the whole-school community to build their commitment and capacity to address bullying (whole-school intervention);
- students' families through awareness-raising and skills-based self-efficacy activities (family intervention); and
- Grades 4–5 students and their teachers through the provision of teacher training and comprehensive teaching and learning support materials (classroom intervention).

WHOLE-SCHOOL INTERVENTION

Four to five key staff were selected by each intervention school to form a whole-school team to lead their school's delivery of the FS programme.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Nine 10–15 minute home activities linked to the classroom learning activities were provided to parents of the intervention students. These home activities were developed to reinforce and practise classroom learning and to raise parents' awareness, knowledge, skills and self efficacy to talk with their children about bullying.

GRADES 4 AND 5 CLASSROOM INTERVENTION

Interactive, student-centred learning activities were designed to be implemented for approximately three hours at the start of three 10-week terms in each of the first two school years (nine hours/year) with the study cohort (during Grades 4 to 5) to boost students' knowledge, attitudes and skills.

The learning activities focussed on building pro-social skills, including peer discouragement of bullying, social support for individuals being bullied, non-violent conflict resolution and other interpersonal problem-solving skills, and empathy for individuals being bullied. They also addressed students' understanding of what constitutes bullying and how to respond to bullying, and why bullying is unacceptable behaviour.

Intervention teachers were asked to use the FS learning activities instead of those they would normally teach from the state curriculum.

INTERVENTION OUTCOMES

Prior to the intervention beginning, 14% (n = 320) of students in all study schools reported bullying another student at least once in the previous school term. Approximately one in six students (16.3%, n = 320) reported being bullied every few weeks or more often, and almost a quarter (24.6%, n = 482) reported being bullied once or twice a term. Just less than one-third (31.9%, n = 289/906) of students who were bullied did not speak to anyone about being bullied.

At the end of the first year of the intervention, Grade 4 students in the comparison group had a significantly increased likelihood of being bullied compared to those in the intervention group. No difference between the groups was found at the end of the second year of the intervention, when students were in Grade 5, but students in the comparison group were again more likely to have experienced being bullied than intervention students at the end of the third year of the intervention, when students were in Grade 6.

In addition to reducing bullying behaviour, the intervention encouraged students who were bullied to seek help by speaking to someone about this bullying. At the end of each year of the intervention, students in the comparison condition were more likely to have told no one they were being bullied, compared to students in schools that received the intervention.

Further, at the end of the first, second and third years of the intervention, comparison group students were approximately one and a half times more likely than intervention group students to indicate they saw another student, in their year level or younger, being bullied. However, no statistically significant differences were observed between the intervention and comparison group students regarding the frequency of bullying other students.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

The programme appears to be most effective in Grade 4 and possibly Grade 6 but not in Grade 5, and not for bullying of another student. Several reasons may account for the lack of programme effects on students who bully others. Firstly, the programme, while whole-school in

approach, largely targeted only one age group of students and their teachers and parents at the classroom and home levels. Grade 4 students were selected as the study cohort to reduce the typical acceleration of bullying behaviour that occurs around Grade 5 and 6 in Australian schools. However, focusing on one age group may have limited the reach of this intervention's effectiveness. Whereas teachers of the intervention cohort were very supportive of the strategies to reduce bullying, the other teachers in the school who did not receive the intervention were likely to be less enthusiastic.

One possible explanation for the lack of programme effects on reports of bullying others is that it may not be possible to change perpetrators' behaviour using only universal whole-school activities. Future research should investigate the specific needs of schools to adequately support behaviour change among students who bully others, including altering negative reputational biases these students may experience from their peers, even when behaving in socially appropriate ways (Hymel et al, 1990).

Most schools in this study took at least a year to establish their whole-school team, consult with the school community, and review their bullying behaviour policy. Despite our outstanding school retention rates and interest from senior school administrators, many intervention schools reported they were experiencing 'change overload' and had insufficient capacity, especially time and skills, to effectively implement the programme. Hence, the whole-school intervention required greater development of staff capacity and more obvious linkage to existing structures or other policy and programme areas in the school.

CONCLUSION

Taken together these findings provide support for the mounting evidence that when whole-school programmes are carefully designed and implemented and involve students in their different social contexts, they can reduce children's experiences of bullying behaviour and increase the likelihood of them telling someone if they are bullied. →

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Further research has since been conducted by this team of researchers as part of a large follow-up study to FS called Friendly Schools Friendly Families (FSFF). FSFF addressed the shortfalls

identified in the FS resources to determine the optimal combinations of universal, selective and targeted intervention components at the student, classroom, home and whole-school levels, engaged the whole school in learning not just the study cohort and built school capacity to prevent and respond earlier and more effectively to bullying behaviour (Cross et al, 2012). ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

Following this study, the FS resources were revised and tested in several other large randomised control trials and released in 2013 for distribution under the title Friendly School PLUS (FS+). This evidence-based resource for primary and secondary schools builds students' (aged from 6 to 15 years) social skills and reduces bullying, including cyber bullying, in school communities. The FS+ programme draws on extensive empirical research conducted since 1999 by Professor Donna Cross and researchers at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre. Further information is available online at <http://www.friendlyschools.com.au>.

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