Bullying Intervention for Bullying Behaviors

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Tier 2 & 3 Intervention

Programs that are designed to reduce bullying are most effective when bullying is addressed from both a prevention and intervention standpoint. In other words, bullying programs produce the best results when schools incorporate three tiers of increasingly more intensive intervention (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Universal interventions are designed to impact all students, while targeted or secondary interventions are designed to meet the needs of students who demonstrate or are at-risk for demonstrating bullying behaviors. The purpose of this strategy brief is to describe interventions for students who are at risk or who have already been identified as engaging in bullying behavior. The strategy brief Bullying Prevention & Intervention addresses bullying prevention and intervention more generally and focuses more particularly on preventing bullying. In the current brief, it is assumed that bullying prevention strategies are already in place.

Identifying Students for Bullying Intervention

Identifying students at risk for involvement in bullying is difficult because there is no "bully personality." However, environmental factors and peer group factors can be used to predict involvement in bullying (Barboza et al., 2009). Students who lack strong support systems, whether from their parents, friends, or teachers, are more likely to engage in bullying (Barboza et al., 2009). Additionally, students who have been bullied previously themselves are more likely to engage in bullying (Barboza et al., 2009). Additionally, students who are transitioning into a new social environment often use bullying as a means of moving up the social ladder (Pelligrini & Long, 2002). Schools should therefore pay particular attention to students during transition years, such as freshmen coming into high school. Students who are involved in peer groups that have positive attitudes towards bullying may also be more likely to engage in bullying in order to better affiliate with their peers (Salmivalli, 2010).

In most cases, in order to recommend a student for interventions, schools often require documentation that

prevention efforts (i.e., consistent behavioral expectations, universal prevention programs) were tried first, but not effective for the student. Additionally, administering a comprehensive bully survey and holding staff and student focus groups that highlight the needs of youth involved in bullying can help identify students involved in bullying (American Educational Research Association, 2013).

What Are Targeted Interventions for Bullying?

Targeted interventions are usually delivered in a classroom or small group (e.g., counseling group, psychoeducational group) format and usually include role-play, discussion, and example scenarios (Horne, Stoddard, & Bell, 2007). Small group, targeted interventions for bullies and victims are the most prevalent type of bullying intervention implemented in a school setting due to the cost-effectiveness of these interventions over school-wide approaches (Bell, Raczynski, & Horne, 2010; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004).

These small group interventions for students are sometimes coupled with parent-training and teacher-training groups that address how to implement the bullying interventions with fidelity (Horne et al., 2007). Small group interventions may also be appropriate for bullies and victims with more chronic mental health problems that are at-risk for developing clinical levels of depression, anxiety, or anger issues (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). Still, Biggs, Vernverg, Twemlow, Fonagy, and Dill (2008) report that when bullying intervention programs are implemented in a stand-alone fashion, teachers view them as another task to complete, feel that they are not adequately trained, and are not motivated to implement the curriculum with fidelity if they are not certain of the effectiveness. Thus, although this brief presents evidence-based interventions and curricula for bullying intervention, no one program will be effective without supplemental school-wide efforts that seek to adequately train staff in not only specific programming, but also how to improve the overall school climate.

What is the Goal of this Intervention?

Students who qualify for supplemental bullying interventions may be those who have been involved in bullying, and the involvement does not decrease following primary intervention. A common supplemental intervention consists of small group interventions

designed to build social skills, empathy, and conflict resolution strategies, among others. These interventions are often referred to as psychoeducational group interventions and provide students with awareness, an open forum to ask questions, and guidance for generalization of these techniques to other settings. Small group interventions do not generally focus on rehabilitation, which would be more appropriate for an individualized intervention (see Project Target Bullying Intervention Program strategy brief). Another intervention at this level may involve a group role-playing with bullies and/or victims on how to problem-solve peer conflicts. These small groups are often led by teachers, administrators, and counselors and usually include specific lesson plans and objectives (Horne et al., 2007). Many small group interventions for bullying also contain parental involvement components (Swearer et al., in press).

Examples of Targeted Bullying Interventions

Several bullying intervention programs have been developed that include services for students who do not respond to prevention efforts, including *Bully Busters, Bullyproofing Your School, The Peaceful Schools Project*, and *Steps to Respect.* When choosing an intervention, schools should consider the unique components and targeted skills of each instead of adopting a "one size fits all" approach. Readers are directed to the National Registry of Programs and Practices, Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, and the Model Programs Guide resources at the end of this brief as aids when choosing evidence-based interventions. Although many programs have now been deemed "evidence-based," these programs still vary in effectiveness and are designed for specific

populations (e.g. ethnic groups, age, type of bullying). Additionally, none of these programs are likely to be effective without careful implementation and without being monitored to ensure that they are being implemented as designed (American Education Research Association, 2013). More specific information on several bullying intervention programs is available in the *Examples of Bullying Preventions and Intervention Programs Resource Brief.*

Behavioral approaches. Ross and Horner (2009) created and investigated a behaviorally-based bullying intervention designed to be used for bullies. They hypothesized that a large portion of bullying behaviors are maintained by social attention. The investigators taught bystanders and victims to ask the bully to stop, then

walk away, and if necessary, tell an adult. This decreased the amount of social attention that was delivered to bullies. Their results showed the expected decrease in both bullying behaviors and unwanted bystander behaviors (e.g., cheering the bully on, laughing). The researchers noted that bullying behaviors that are not maintained by peer attention will likely be unaffected by this intervention. These findings suggest a need for even more focused interventions for students whose negative behaviors remain even after secondary supports are implemented. Moreover, many small group interventions may be unsuccessful for bullies due to deviant talk (see Target Bullying Intervention Program Strategy Brief).

Individual Interventions to Reduce Bullying

According to Swearer and colleagues (2009), although school-wide bullying prevention programming is necessary and

Student Draw-a-Bully drawings in this document are courtesy of Susan Swearer's *Empowerment Initiative.* http://empowerment.unl.edu/.

beneficial, school-wide approaches may not be effective for the most extreme or chronic cases in which children are experiencing bullying, victimization, or both (Swearer et al. ,2009. Before targeting family, peer, and community interventions, it may be most appropriate to start with interventions that address individual level variables that are linked with bullying behaviors. Individual counseling may be able to target mental health problems experienced by individuals experiencing long-term bullying involvement. During individual counseling, it is imperative to stress the goals of the intervention, expectations for therapy, and consequences for deviations from expectations with the student. It is recommended that students should be taught emotional regulation skills, including how to identify maladaptive emotions, negative thoughts, and how they connect to bullying behaviors.

Therapists often encourage students to track the situations they experience and the accompanying thoughts and emotions through a diary or worksheet with the end goal being to challenge and reframe maladaptive thoughts or cognitive distortions (e.g., "Aggression is an effective way to handle conflict") that contribute to bullying involvement. Thought records can also aid in decreasing hostile attribution biases (i.e., tendencies to misinterpret social cues as overly aggressive) or blaming others for bullying involvement. Anger management may also be addressed in an individual therapeutic or counseling setting by helping students identify anger triggers and problem solving (Swearer et al., 2009). In addition, it may be beneficial for students to engage in empathy training that emphasizes how bullying may affect victims (e.g. mental health problems, physical health problems, school refusal, family issues). The Target Bullying Intervention Program (T-BIP; Swearer & Givens, 2006; see T-BIP Strategy Brief) is a
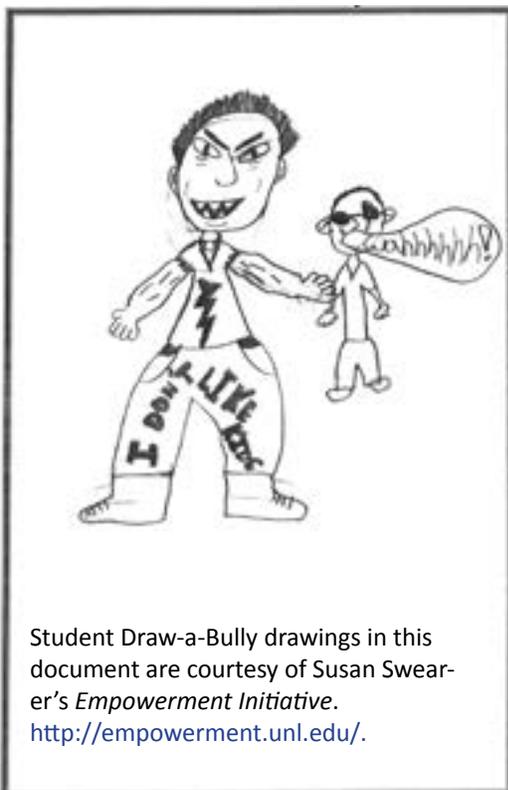
three-hour, individual cognitive-behavioral intervention that aims to reduce bullying (as measured by office disciplinary referrals and suspensions) that takes advantage of many of these strategies.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of these targeted programs are all contingent upon the use of accurate data collection, efficient progress monitoring tools, competent school personnel, ongoing and embedded professional development, and formal coaching and coordination supports (Sugai, Horner, & Algozzine, 2011, p. 3). As stated previously, students who qualify for additional supports should not receive "more of the same" techniques or programs that have proved ineffective for them. Instead, targeted efforts should try to be tailored across the social ecology (e.g., school, family, community) and consider the function of the bullying behaviors (i.e., to receive peer or adult attention, to escape an

activity). Even if students are participating in individual counseling or groups to provide education about bullying, Sugai and colleagues (2011) suggests that once the function(s) of bullying have been defined, students should be reminded of behavioral expectations at the beginning of the day, be consistently and actively monitored, receive immediate performance feedback throughout the day, and check out with an adult at the end of the day, if possible. (See Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategy Brief and Behavior Monitoring Strategy Brief for a more thorough review of the aforementioned bullying prevention programs and monitoring strategies). Overall, effective bullying intervention should expand upon school-wide prevention efforts, and should be reserved for students for whom those prevention efforts have been deemed unsuccessful. In this way, a school's limited resources can be most efficiently used to provide supports for students who need them most.

Resources on Bullying Prevention and Intervention

For further information about specific bullying prevention and intervention programs, see the Strategy Briefs listed here. The first focuses more on prevention programs or programs which address both prevention and intervention, while the second provides an overview of several well-known bullying intervention programs, and the third focuses on one specific bully intervention, the Target Bullying Intervention:
- *Bullying prevention and intervention. Strategy brief.*
- *Examples of bullying prevention and intervention programs. Resource brief.*
- *The Target Bullying Intervention Program. Program Brief.*
All of these are available at: http://k12engagement.unl.edu.

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