Teacher intervention in situations of bullying

**Background and Purpose**

Bullying is a destructive relationship problem involving a power difference in which bullying children repeatedly use aggression to control their victims, who in turn become increasingly defenceless (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Children who bully hurt their victims and maintain power over them using many different strategies.

Many schools have implemented bullying prevention programs, but recent studies on the effectiveness of these programs reveal that they have not been widely successful in reducing bullying (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). So, while some schools succeed in reducing bullying, many schools do not, and it is not yet evident why those in the latter group do not succeed. There are some initial indications that teachers feel less than adequately prepared to address bullying. In a recent study, teachers reported feeling inadequate in intervening with recurrent bullying incidents in addition to their other numerous responsibilities (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005).

Teachers’ ability to identify and respond to bullying in the school context likely varies according to many different factors related to the teachers themselves, the students involved, and the broader social and physical context in which the bullying occurs. The goal of our study was to determine what features of bullying situations influence teachers’ decision to intervene. To accomplish this, we used a forced-choice task that reveals the degree of importance teachers place on different features of bullying situations in their decisions to intervene or not.
Methods

Participants (N = 235, 78% women) were recruited through the membership of two provincial teachers’ federations in Canada. Teachers answered questions pertaining to their demographics and completed a series of choice tasks. In each choice task, three different bullying scenarios were presented together, each one comprised of specific attributes that were systematically varied. The attributes for the bullying scenarios were developed using the PREVNet (2009) factsheet about bullying. Teachers were asked to select the scenario in which they would be most likely to intervene. This method was developed by marketing researchers (Orme, 2006), and it has recently been adapted to study teacher preferences related to school-based prevention programs (Cunningham, et al., 2009).

Our analyses of the survey data permitted us to determine the relative influence of each of the nine attributes on teachers’ decisions to intervene in a given bullying situation. Overall, respondents were most strongly influenced by two attributes related to the experience of victimized children: (a) the level of victim distress and (b) the frequency of victimization. Conversely, four attributes that describe individual characteristics of children who bully and are victimized exerted relatively little influence on teachers’ decisions to intervene. These included: (a) academic status, (b) socio-economic status, (c) physical size, and (d) gender.

Our analyses also allowed us to identify two subgroups of teachers that differentially use the information in the scenarios to make their intervention decisions. The first group (61% of teachers) made intervention decisions that were more influenced by the plight of the victimized child. These teachers were highly influenced by attributes in the scenarios that revealed the vulnerability and powerlessness of victims such as frequency of victimization and level of distress. This subgroup of “protective” teachers appears motivated to intervene when it is
apparent to them that victimized students are highly vulnerable in bullying situations. The choices of the teachers in the second group (39%) demonstrated more sensitivity to a wider range of attributes in bullying situations compared to the protective teachers.

**Implications for practice**

Findings from this study have identified that the majority of teachers are attuned to the vulnerability of students who are victimized while only a small percentage of teachers take more elements of the situation into account when identifying bullying situations. Although some students may display evident distress when faced with bullying, students who do not display evident distress may not receive help from their teachers. Furthermore, this focus on the plight of victimized children may lead teachers to underestimate the risks to children who are doing the bullying and not provide them with appropriate assistance. Research indicates that bullying is harmful for the children who bully as well, as it has negative consequences for their psychological, social, and academic functioning (Craig & Pepler, 2007). A substantial proportion of children who bully are also victims of bullying themselves, and the combination of involvement in both roles in bullying relationships puts them at highest risk for negative academic and psychosocial outcomes (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). These findings highlight the importance for bullying prevention training amongst teachers that emphasizes the many ways in which bullying can be displayed as well as the many reactions students may have to bullying.
References


About this summary

This research summary was developed from:


This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

Key Words

Bullying, Peer relations, School Environment, Teachers/Educators, School safety, Safe schools