



Understanding and Preventing Youth Bullying & Peer Victimization during the Pandemic

Dorothy L. Espelage, Ph.D.

William C. Friday Distinguished Professor of Education
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA
espelage@unc.edu



FUNDING SOURCES & DISCLAIMER

Research was supported by Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (#1U01/CE001677) to Dorothy Espelage (PI); *Opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the CDC*

Research was supported by NIJ Grant (MUOFX-0022) to Dorothy Espelage (PI) & Sabina Low (co-PI); *Opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice*

Research was supported by NIJ Grant (#2015-MU-MU-K003) to Iris Ed, Vincent, Espelage, Walker (co-PIs); Project SOARS (Student Ownership, Accountability, and Responsibility for School safety). National Institutes of Justice (IRIS Ed)

APA Stress in America™ Survey - 2020

APA Stress in America™ Survey found

- 46% of parents reported high levels of stress related to COVID.
- 71% of parents say managing distance/online learning for their children is a significant source of stress.

PARENTAL SOURCES OF STRESS

% reporting very/somewhat significant source of stress in their life

A family member getting coronavirus

74%

Government response to coronavirus

74%

Disrupted routines/adjusting to new routines

74%

Getting coronavirus

73%

Managing distance/online learning for their child(ren)

71%

Basic needs (i.e., availability of and access to food, housing)

70%

Self-isolation

67%

Access to health care services

66%

Missing out on major milestones

63%

The Harris Poll conducted this survey on behalf of APA from April 24 to May 4, 2020; the online survey included 3,013 adults age 18+ who reside in the United States. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report>



Even Before May, Student Reports Suggest Collective Trauma

- Higher levels of concern about present and future
- Higher levels of stress & depression
- More concerned than usual about health, finances, education and basic needs
- Lack of connection to adults and school communities
- Decreased sense of belonging
- Regional variations more pronounced than race/ethnicity but obstacle load varies by race/ethnicity and some groups far more susceptible to mental health problems

COVID-19 & Bullying

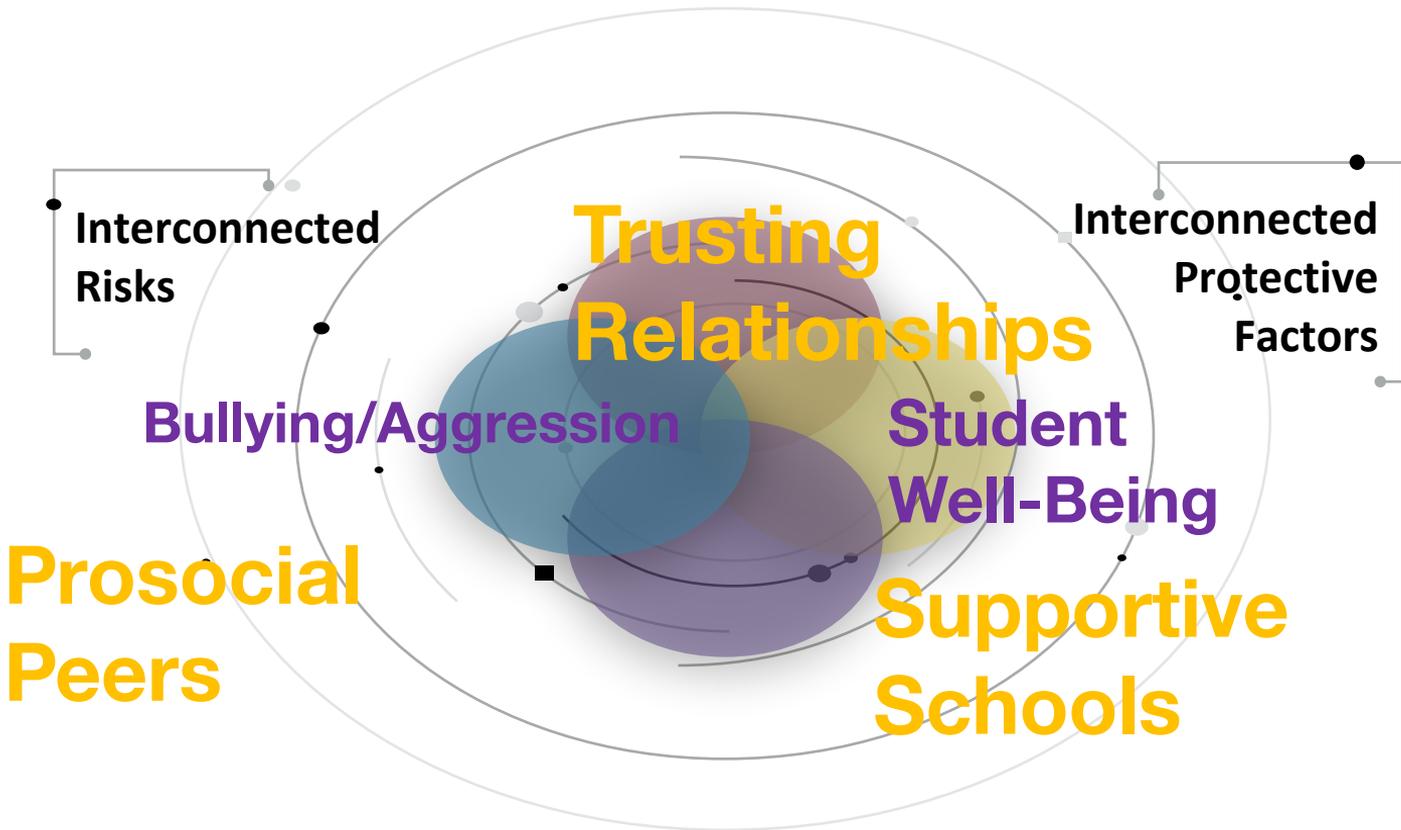
- Babvey et al., 2020 - Conversations on Twitter were reviewed to measure increases in abusive or hateful content, and cyberbullying. Evidence of the potential for children to be exposed to increasingly abusive content while online.
- Karmakar & Das (2020) - collected cyberbullying related public tweets (N = 454, 046) posted between Jan. 1 – June 7, 2020. Upward trend of cyberbullying-related tweets since mid-March 2020.
- Shanahan et al. (2020) – age =22, Pre-COVID-19 emotional distress (age = 20) was the strongest predictor of during-pandemic emotional distress, followed by during-pandemic economic and psychosocial stressors (e.g., lifestyle and economic disruptions) and hopelessness, and pre-pandemic social stressors (e.g., **bullying victimization** and stressful life events).

Policies & Procedures
-Behavioral Expectations
(PBIS)

Effective Bully/Violence Prevention

Social-Emotional
Competences

Ongoing
ALL-Staff
Training



Prosocial Peers

Bullying/Aggression

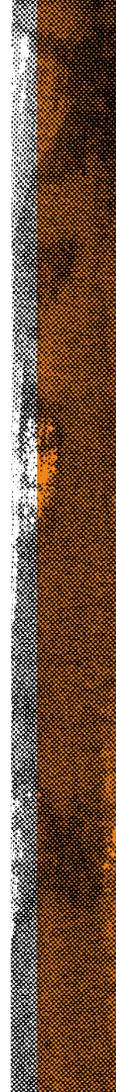
Trusting Relationships

Student Well-Being

Supportive Schools

Interconnected Risks

Interconnected Protective Factors



Definition of Bullying

(CDC; Gladden et al., 2014)

Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior(s) among school-age children that has a high likelihood of causing physical or psychological harm or injury and is characterized by:

- 1) an imbalance of **real or perceived power** that favors the aggressor(s);
- 2) is **repeated or has a high likelihood** of being repeated;
- 3) The victim(s) of bullying may feel **intimidated, demeaned, or humiliated as a result of the aggression.**

Bullying Prevalence

Among 3rd – 8th graders:

15% Chronically Victimized

17% Ringleader Bullies

8% Bully-Victims

60% Bystanders

Only 13% intervene to help victim

Definition of Cyber-Bullying

(Hinduja & Patchin, 2009)

- Cyberbullying is defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phone, or other electronic devices” (p. 5).
- Utilizing technology, youth can send or post humiliating or threatening messages or photos of their targets to a third party or to a public forum where many online participants visit (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Cyber-Bullying Prevalence

- 7% of students in U.S. public schools nationwide reported being cyberbullied in 2013 (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016).
- Rate of cyberbullying is lower than the rate of face-to-face bullying victimization (22%)

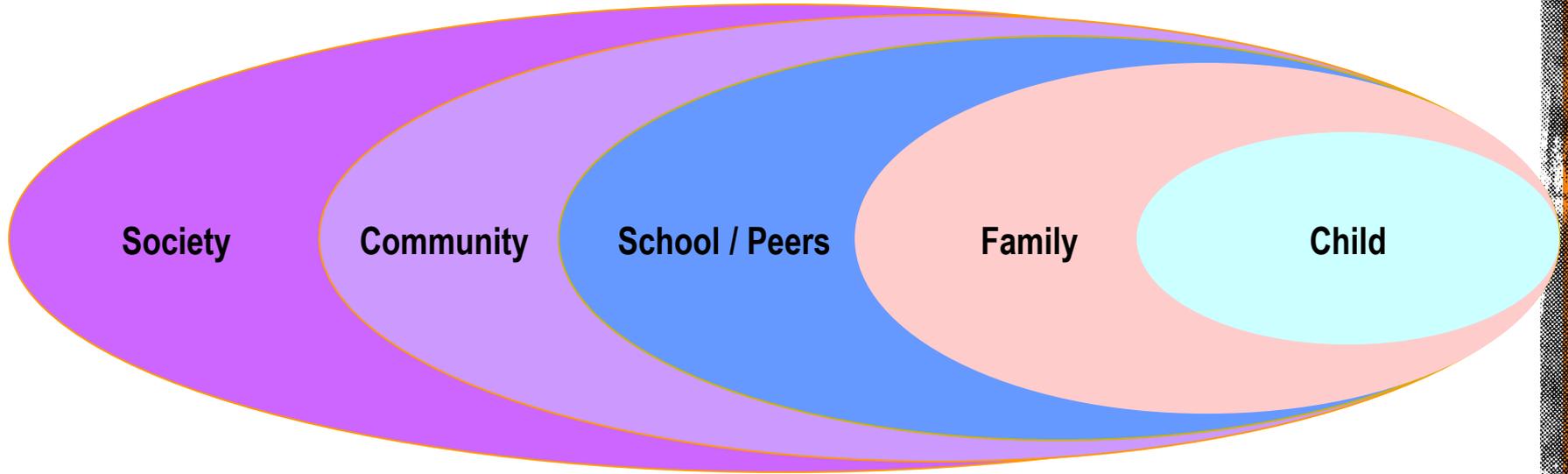
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Bullying can be broadly construed as social interactions (or social dynamic) that are influenced, maintained or mitigated by relationships in the **school, peer, and familial contexts** (Pepler et al., 2006; Espelage, 2016).
- **Social interactional learning model** - family violence serves as an important context for understanding the relation between bullying perpetration and involvement in anger, alcohol use, and delinquency as predictors of sexual harassment perpetration and teen dating violence (Espelage et al. 2014; Rinehart, Espelage, & Bub, 2017).
- **Gendered harassment** (sexual harassment, homophobic name-calling) - reinforces traditional masculinity that is emotionally restrictive, competitive, and aggressive (Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1995; Meyer, 2008).

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

1. School Sense of Belonging
2. Empathy
3. Parenting Monitoring
4. Social Support

Social-Ecological Perspective



(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage & Horne, 2007; Espelage, 2014)

Individual Correlates of Bullying Involvement

- Depression/Anxiety
- Empathy
- Delinquency
- Impulsivity
- Other forms of Aggression
- Alcohol/Drug Use
- Positive Attitudes toward Violence/Bullying
- Low Value for Prosocial Behaviors

For review (Espelage & Horne, 2007; Espelage & Holt, 2012; Espelage & Hong, 2012; Espelage et al., 2019)

Affective-Cognitive Empathy & Bullying Behavior

A recent meta analysis:

- 38 studies on affective empathy
- 24 studies on cognitive empathy
- Relation with bullying behaviors indicated that there is support for the association of lower levels of empathy and bullying –
- Particularly for affective empathy (Van Noorden et al., 2015).
- Nickerson et al. 2015 – links to defending behavior.

Findings suggest that targeting affective empathy and attitudes supportive over time within youth appears to be a fruitful prevention strategy.

Meta-Analytic Study

Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek (2010)

- Reviewed 153 studies since 1970
- Youth who bully other students: have significant externalizing behavior, social competence and academic challenges, negative attitudes toward others, family characterized by conflict
- Peer Status & Bully varied by age: Adolescents who bully have higher peer status than children who bully others

Social Network Studies: Peers Matter

Homophily hypothesis supported in social network studies – early adolescence:

- Bully perpetration – selection & socialization
(Espelage et al. 2003; Merrin et al., 2019)
- Homophobic name-naming/Sexual harassment – selection & socialization
(Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007; Tucker et al., 2016)
- Willingness to Intervene – socialization
(Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012; Ingram, Espelage et al., 2019)

Family & School Risk Factors

■ FAMILY

- Lack of supervision
- Lack of attachment
- Negative, critical relationships
- Lack of discipline/ consequences
- Support for violence
- Modeling of violence

■ SCHOOL

- Lack of supervision
- Lack of attachment
- Negative, critical relationships
- Lack of discipline/ consequences
- Support for violence
- Modeling of violence

Parental Monitoring & Bullying

- Bullying perpetration predicted *lower* perceived parental monitoring
- Youth may be encouraged by believing they can “get away with” bullying involvement
- Bi-directional effects between parenting and youth behavior
- Transition to high school is pivotal for parental monitoring



Teacher/Staff Perceptions of School Culture: Links to Student Reports of Bullying, Victimization, Aggression, & Willingness to Intervene

Dorothy L. Espelage, Ph.D.

Joshua Polanin, Ph.D.

Sabina Low, Ph.D.

School Psychology Quarterly (2014)

This research was supported by Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (#1U01/CE001677) to Dorothy Espelage (PI)

Meta-Analysis of Bully Prevention Programs

Ttofi & Farrington, 2011, 2019

Journal of Experimental Criminology

- Decreases in rates of *victimization* were associated with the following special program elements:
 - Non-punitive disciplinary methods
 - parent training/meetings
 - use of videos,
 - cooperative group work
 - greater duration and intensity of the program
- However, work with peers (e.g., peer mediation) was associated with an increase in victimization
- This iatrogenic finding is not new. Scholars have argued for a decade that peer mediation is contraindicated for bully prevention (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Meta-Analysis of Bully Prevention Programs

Ttofi & Farrington, 2011, 2019

Journal of Experimental Criminology

- Decreases in rates of *bully perpetration* for programs that included:
 - parent training/meetings
 - improved playground supervision
 - Non-punitive disciplinary methods
 - classroom management
 - teacher training
 - classroom rules
 - whole-school anti-bullying policy
 - cooperative group work
 - greater number of elements and the duration
- Programs - less effective in the US and in Canada

Bullying Prevention – Pushing The Field Forward

- Bullying co-occurs with other types of aggression and other risky behavior (delinquency, AOD).
- Overlapping risk and protective factors need to be targeted in school-based programs in order to address spectrum of problem behavior (Cataliano et al., 2002).
- Need to consider interventions that target multiple forms of violence and aggression that are salient for early adolescents, including peer victimization, homophobic teasing, and sexual harassment/violence (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Hamby & Grych, 2013)

Social-Emotional Learning

- **Self-awareness:** The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.
- **Social awareness:** The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, feel motivation & agency to accomplish personal/collective goals.
- **Self-management:** The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and supports
- **Relationship skills:** The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.
- **Responsible decision-making:** The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- SEL focuses on the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help youth more effectively handle life challenges, make better decisions, and thrive in both their learning and their social environments through a climate that supports the practicing of skills.
- A meta-analysis of 213 programs found that if a school implements a quality SEL curriculum, they can expect better student behavior and an 11 percentile increase in test scores

(Durlak, Weissberg, ymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Taylor et al. (2017) Meta-analysis

- Meta-analysis of 82 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions involving 97,406 K-12 students
- Follow-up outcomes demonstrates SEL's enhancement of positive youth development, including prosocial behaviors.

**MULTI-SITE EVALUATION OF SECOND STEP:
STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH PREVENTION
(SECOND STEP – SSTP)
IN PREVENTING AGGRESSION, BULLYING, & SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

**Dorothy L. Espelage, Ph.D.
Professor, Psychology,
University of Florida**

**Sabina Low, Ph.D.,
Arizona State University
Josh Polanin, M.A., DSG
Eric Brown, Ph.D., University of Miami**

***Journal of Adolescent Health (2013), Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology (2015);
School Psychology Review (2015)***

Research supported by Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (#1U01/CE001677)

Major Study Objective

To rigorously evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention program on impacting bullying behavior, peer victimization, and sexual harassment/violence among a large sample of 6th graders in a nested cohort longitudinal design.

Results – Middle School

- Reductions in physical aggression, bullying, cyberbullying, homophobic name-calling, & sexual harassment across three-year middle school study (Espelage et al., 2014, 2015, 2016).
- Greater reductions when teachers implemented with fidelity & engaged with program as they would academics (Polanin & Espelage, 2015).

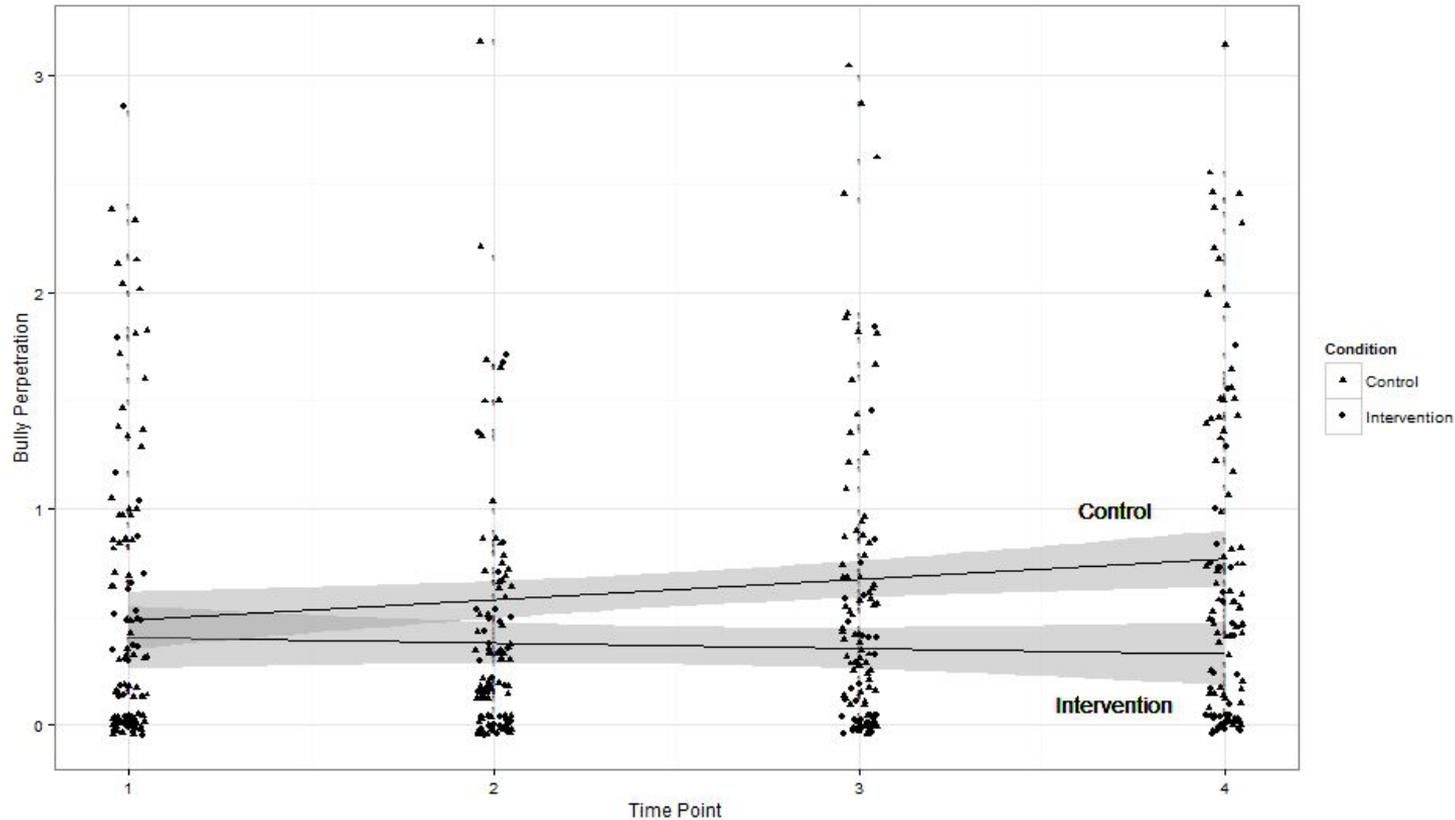
Results – High School Effects



Individuals in the treatment group reported significantly higher levels of growth in school belonging from T1 – T4 ($b = .013, p = .042$), growth in school belonging was in turn associated with reductions in growth in bullying perpetration from T5 – T7 ($b = -.147, p = .067$); Espelage, Merrin et al., under review.

Students with Disabilities – Bully Perpetration

(Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015; 2016)



LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY & ENGAGING
YOUTH TO PREVENT BULLYING &
PROMOTE SEL % POSITIVE SCHOOL
CLIMATE

PROPEL
the WORLD



Youth-Driven Interventions

- Youth do feel that schools should work harder to establish a positive school climate.
- Adults need to pay attention to **emotional and physical safety**.
- **Youth indicated that fairness & equity issues need to be addressed directly.**
- Research shows that students in schools with positive climates are more likely to report on the situations, individuals and events that endanger a school's safety.
- Such a climate can also improve student bonding and school engagement and serve as a protective factor against a host of negative outcomes over the long term within and beyond the school context.

How did this make you feel?

- Frustrated 🙄
- Afraid 😨
- Depressed 😞
- Angry 😡
- Worried 😟
- Other 😐

Tell us more about this:

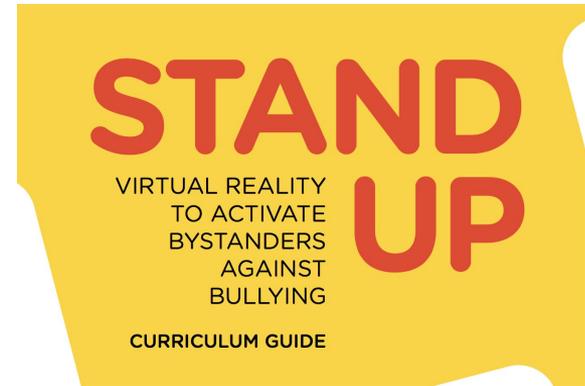
Type here ...

Submit



Virtual Reality Bully Prevention Approach

- Original curriculum: *Stand Up: Virtual Reality to Activate Bystanders Against Bullying*
 - Informed by the empirical base (e.g., Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012), developed by an advisory board of youth aggression experts and professional GoogleVR screenwriters.
- 6 sessions delivered by a study staff member once per week
- 3 embedded VR experiences (created for Daydream) focusing on (1) the feelings of victims (2) the role of messages youth get about bullying in allowing it to continue and (3) being a change agent against bullying through small, realistic steps
- Each lesson also included processing discussions and perspective taking activities



Ingram, K. M., Espelage, D.L., Valido, A., Heinhorst, J., & Joyce, M. (2019)

Virtual Reality Bully Prevention Approach

- Results of small scale RCT (two classrooms) – significant increases in empathy & willingness to intervene
- No impact on bullying behavior
- Youth liked the 5-6 minute VR experiences, but found the curriculum less attractive
- ... **This pilot justifies further exploration of incorporating VR to reduce youth violence**



Ingram, K. M., Espelage, D.L., Valido, A., Heinhorst, J., & Joyce, M. (2019)

BullyDown: Social-emotional Learning App



Ybarra, Espelage, Valido, & Hong, 2019

Sources of Strength employs a radically strength--based approach to prevention. in schools – PEER LEADERS.

Sources of Strength focuses on developing protective factors, using a model that is innovative, interactive, and radically strength-based.

Using an active learning model, incorporating art, storytelling, small group sharing and games.

Sources of Strength explores the eight protective factors, depicted in the wheel of strength, to develop resilient individuals and communities.



Program outcomes have shown:

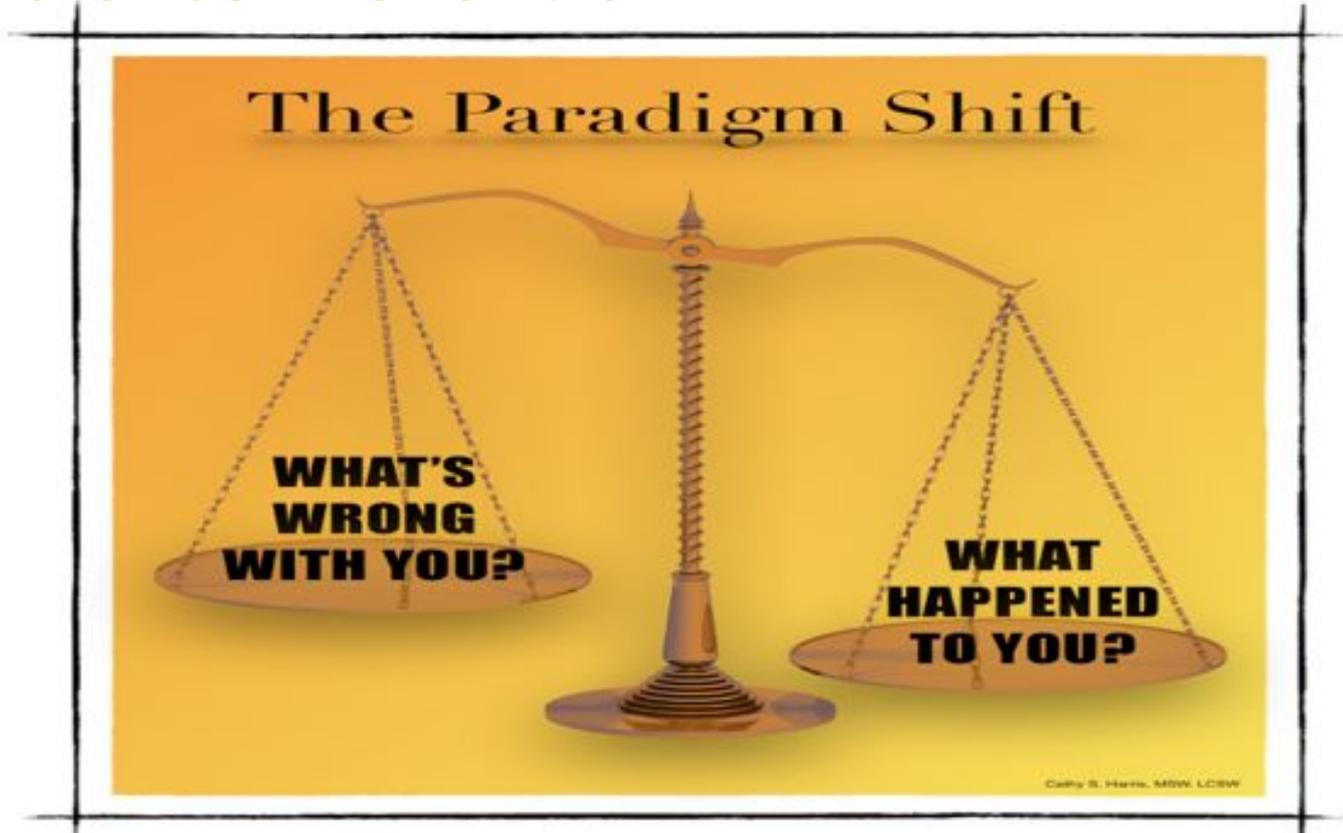
- Increase in connectedness to adults
- Increase in school engagement
- Increase in likelihood to refer a suicidal friend to an adult
- Increase in positive perceptions of adult support
- Increased acceptability of seeking help
- Largest increases amongst students with a history of suicidal ideation

Wyman,, P.. et al.. (2010). An outcome evaluation of the Sources of Strength suicide prevention program delivered by adolescent peer leaders in high schools.. American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 100: 1653--1661.

<https://sourcesofstrength.org/homebased/>



Trauma-Informed Approaches to Violence Prevention



Conclusion

- Prevention programs yield reductions in bullying and victimization, and gender-based aggression.
- Effects are strongest among elementary school children & diminish as youth mature.
- Perceptions of staff matter – intolerance for sexual harassment is critical to reduce gender-based bullying and other forms of aggression.
- Finally, to narrow the research-practice gap, the research must be **RIGOROUS & RELEVANT**

Key Takeaways

- Open lines of **communication** so kids/adults know their concerns are normal and valid
- Ensure **resources** to support youth (online or in-person) including mental health services and SEL programming
- Model **self-care** including behaviors such as taking breaks
- Watch for **behavior changes** in children as these may be signs of stress and anxiety
- Help students and parents outline their **expectations** for virtual learning and supports they need
- Maintain **social connections** through outdoor activities, video chats, and in-person visits when safe

Key Takeaways (cont.)

- Incorporate **SEL skills in the classroom and at home**, and help students understand the importance of their behaviors and how they can help reduce risk and protect others
- Focus on school climate improvements, including prioritizing **inclusive, representative** leadership structures, connection to community and youth voice and agency
- Support **adults**, too! Design **virtual systems** to support connections within the school community including staff circles, small group reflections, advisory conversation prompts and intentional moments for joy and laughter
- Facilitate opportunities for adults to develop trauma-informed behavior plans and strategic interventions appropriate to remote and hybrid environments

APPENDIX

Restorative Problem Solving

Although further research is needed, there are very promising findings endorsing the use of Restorative Problem Solving in our schools in reducing violence (Fronius et al., 2016).



Universal Strategies

- Open lines of communication with your students/children to discuss fears/anxieties about the virus, school (whether in-person or online), missing their friends, etc. it is important for kids/adults to know these concerns are normal and valid
- Determine if the school has any resources to support youth (online or in-person) including mental health services such as counseling, social-emotional learning (SEL) programming and peer supports
- Model self care including behaviors such as taking breaks, eating well and exercising, and staying connected
- Watch for behavior changes in your children. Behaviors like irritation, excessive worrying or sadness, unhealthy eating and/or sleeping, or difficulty concentrating as these may be signs of stress and anxiety

Face-to-Face Learning

- Incorporate SEL skills in the classroom (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making)
 - Psychological distancing
 - Frequent communication through notes or check in meetings
 - Reflecting on social emotional skills in an age appropriate way. (ex. Having youth examine literary characters, or teens evaluate world leaders SEL skills)
- Help students understand the importance of their behaviors and how they can help reduce risk and protect others
- Find out if the school/teacher will be incorporating mindfulness and/or SEL into classroom curriculum. If not, work on including these practices at home

Online Learning

- Setting Expectations-Helps students and parents outline their expectations for virtual learning as well as verbalize any supports they need to be successful during this difficult transition
- Facilitate SEL skills such as emotion management, recognizing other people's feelings and perspectives and problem solving
- Maintain social connections through outdoor activities, video chats, and in-person visits when safe
- Motivate students and help them feel engaged in their schoolwork
 - Make work engaging and interesting to students
 - Connect what they are learning to something they care about

Focusing on School Climate Improvement

- It is always important to promote a positive school climate, but it's especially critical through periods of crisis
- The schools most prepared to be resilient through crisis are those where supportive relationships between and among staff, students and caregivers are already the norm
- Schools most prepared to adapt to new circumstances have strong climates and cultures, as we saw during shift to virtual learning with COVID
- A positive school climate is associated with higher levels of attendance and engagement for students and staff, reduced bullying and violent behaviors, and improved student outcomes
- Prioritize inclusive, representative leadership structures, connection to community and youth voice and agency

Supporting Adults Too

- Designing virtual systems to support connections within the school community including staff circles, small group reflections, advisory conversation prompts and intentional moments for joy and laughter
- Facilitating opportunities for adults to develop trauma-informed behavior plans and strategic interventions appropriate to remote and hybrid environments
- Re-thinking and designing programs and protocols such as advisory, Restorative Justice Action Teams, behavioral supports, staff onboarding, student orientation and more.
- Strategies for using remote learning to support deepening adult social-emotional skills and build healthy relationships
- Designing supports for young people struggling with engagement, participation and attendance in virtual learning
- Virtual 1.5-hour workshops exploring social-emotional learning, trauma informed practices, and more.