

Bullying Prevention Strategies in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract Bullying is a serious problem that affects the young children's well being. Early childhood educators find it difficult to manage bullying in the classroom. Preschool is the first environment outside of the home setting where children encounter difficulties when they socially interact with their peers. Based on the principles of protecting and establishing a safe environment for all children, the purpose of this review is to present current empirical evidence about the nature and distinctive facet of bullying among preschool children. It defines both the concept of traditional school bullying and bullying in early childhood education, describes the social context of young children's bullying, differentiates between bullies and victims in early childhood education, discusses the young children's interpretations of bullying, describes the young children's functions in bullying, and provides a rationale for the use of bully prevention programs for young children.

Keywords Bully · Victim · Peer relationships · Interventions

At a very early age, young children (12 months) may be aggressive toward their peers. Researchers show that peer aggression is more frequent among preschool (ages three to five) and kindergarten children than any other age group (Hanish et al. 2004). In several countries, aggressive behaviors resembling bullying and peer-victimization are found in children as early as 4-years of age (Monks et al. 2002, 2005).

Research on bullying indicates that it is a severe problem among young children (Alsaker and Nägele 2008; Alsaker and Valkanover 2001; Crick et al. 1999; Hanish et al. 2004; Kochenderfer and Ladd 1996; Monks et al. 2002). Results from studies show that bullying is a risk factor in the children's development (Eriksson et al. 2002), suggesting that it is essential to identify the early bullying symptoms to stop its development. These results have influenced the definition of bullying, especially in early childhood education.

Definitions of Bullying

To understand the concept of bullying, early childhood researchers need to know both the definition of school bullying and bullying in early childhood education.

Definition of School Bullying

Several definitions on bullying focus on group violence, but they differ semantically. Most researchers use the definition that was developed by the Norwegian researcher Olweus (1973). He states that "a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students (Olweus 1993, p. 9). Olweus and his associates have established three criteria when labeling a behavior as bullying: "(1) it is an aggressive behavior of intentional 'harmdoing' (2) which is carried out repeatedly and over time (3) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power" (Olweus and Limber 1999, p. 31). Young children's understanding of bullying seldom involves these definitional criteria (Vaillancourt et al. 2008), motivating several researchers to examine and use

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the young children's interpretations of bullying as part of their definition that they use in their early childhood education settings.

Definition of Bullying in Early Childhood Education

Some researchers have used existing definitions of bullying in their studies. However, early childhood education researchers challenged the use of the traditional definition of bullying with young children. They believe that this definition makes it difficult to distinguish between the initial appearance of more risky bullying behaviors in young children and their natural sequence in communicating aggressive behaviors (Hanish et al. 2004). Arseneault et al. (2006) classified behaviors as bullying when children were excluded from groups and games, called names such as those children who do not have a father, were slapped daily across the face for a month, stabbed with a pencil, and struck with something. When conducting studies in early childhood education, researchers need to use definitions that are appropriate to use in early childhood education settings.

Social Context of Young Children's Bullying

Most young children initiate their peer interactions in preschool and kindergarten. Their experiences can assist them in constructing essential elements that assist them in acquiring social skills that allow them to establish strong friendships and learn to diminish aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Hanish et al. 2004). In early childhood classrooms, young children are introduced to examples of social acceptance and rejection. Gartrell and Gartrell (2008) share an early childhood teacher's description of an incident that occurred in her classroom:

I heard the words *shut up* and went into the bathroom to find out what was happening. Shayna was sitting in the corner crying. I said, "Shayna, why are you crying?" and she answered, "Amanda and Christina said they aren't my friends anymore." I asked Shayna if she had told them to shut up, and she said yes. I told her I was sorry that they made her feel sad and angry, but those words bother people in our classroom. (Amanda and Christina were watching and listening to us talk.) I explained to Shayna that maybe next time she could tell the girls it made her sad to hear they didn't want to be her friends. I told Amanda and Christina that Shayna was feeling sad because of what happened. They went over to Shayna and gave her a hug and said they were sorry. Later, I saw the three playing together (p. 54).

This incident may imply that Shayna is the bully, but it is an incorrect impression. Karen, the teacher was knowledgeable about the children and could distinguish between bullies and victims among them. Therefore, she taught Shayna a different and acceptable way to respond to the other girls rather than to use the phrase *shut up*. Simultaneously, Karen included all three children in the negotiation. She made Amanda and Christina aware that Shayna has a right to be their classmate. Karen's approach is supported by Sprung et al. (2005). They recommend that teachers respond by intervening at the early stage of bullying and on the spot to be effective, practical, and protective. Therefore, it is important that professionals are able to distinguish between young bullies and victims.

Bullies and Victims in Early Childhood

Some young children are involved as bullies or as victims when they encounter bully and victim difficulties (American Psychological Association, APA 2004). Olweus (1993) compares the characteristics of both bullies and victims of bullying (See Table 1).

These characteristics may be the foundation for bullying, although some bully victims may have additional characteristics (e.g., struggling readers and writers). The bully-victims' behavior usually draws out negative responses from some of their peers and teachers (APA 2004). Arseneault et al. (2006) studied 5- and 7-year-old children who experienced bullying either as pure victims or bully/victims. They gathered data about children's behavior problems and school adjustment when they were age five and again when they were age seven. Their reliability ($r = .87$) results showed that young children suffered physical harm and psychological distress as a consequence of bullying. The bullying experiences were serious where 41 % of the bullied children underwent physical harm (e.g., bruises, cuts, burns) and 66 % suffered psychological harm (e.g., bad dreams, tummy ache, school avoidance).

Young children who have been bullied suffer from low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive thoughts (Rigby 2003). In contrast, bullies are both at risk of (a) increasing their anti-social and criminal behavior or (b) continuing to be bullies as adults. Young children who are both aggressive victims and bullies (bully-victims) seem to become socially rejected later in life (Sourander et al. 2009). Young children (5–7 years of age) who have been the victims of bullies tend to be maladjusted during their early school years (Arseneault et al. 2006, Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012). Young children may be able to protect themselves if they know the meaning of bullying. In addition, researchers need to focus in their studies on the young children's interpretations of bullying.

Table 1 Characteristics of both bullies and victims of bullying

Bullies are likely to	Victims are likely to
Have a strong need to control and suppress others to get their own way	Be cautious, sensitive, quiet, withdrawn and shy
Be impatient and easily enraged	Be anxious, insecure, and sad
Be rebellious and aggressive toward others, including parents and teachers	Have low self-esteem
Have little sympathy toward those who are victimized	Be disheartened and suicidal
Be physically stronger than their peers	Lack friends
Intimidate others	Relate better with adults than with peers
Use physical violence	Be physically weaker than their peers

Young Children's Functions in Bullying

Young children's interaction patterns affect bullying. Their form of peer aggression varies from older individuals (e.g., middle childhood, adolescence), particularly in relation to the frequency the victims are attacked. Many young victims may experience victimization only a short period of time rather than over an extended period of time (Kochenderfer and Ladd 1997; Monks et al. 2002).

The pervasiveness of difficulties between bullies and victims has been widely studied. Studies describe the differences among children who (a) bully others and are not victimized (bullies or aggressive non-victims), (b) bully others and are victimized (bully-victims, provocative victims, or aggressive victims), and (c) are victimized without a reason (victims, passive victims, or non-aggressive victims) (Salmivalli 2010). Researchers identified two different types of functions in bullying situations: *predominant* and *peripheral*.

Predominant Functions

Predominant functions consist of preschool bullies, preschool victims, and preschool bully-victims. The preschool bullies are those children who bully others without being victimized. Preschool victims are those children who are vulnerable and become the target of their classmates' aggression without being aggressive towards anyone. Preschool bully-victims are those children who bully others, but their peers also victimize them (Vlachou et al. 2013).

Over time the predominant functions have been found to lack stability with bully and victim roles. When preschool children first attend school and join a new peer group, they may become aggressive toward some of their peers. Ultimately, they interact with their peers, start to understand their peers' point of view, and become less aggressive. Their positive interactions with their peers diminish their aggression toward a smaller group of children. Several children may temporarily encounter victimization, but only some children continue to be stable victims (Perry et al. 1990).

Peripheral Functions

In peripheral functions children indirectly participate in bullying situations. These functions are those of assistants, reinforcers, defenders, and outsiders (Vlachou et al. 2011, 2013). Preschool assistants are those children who assist the bullies. Preschool reinforcers are those children who give the bully positive feedback. Preschool defenders are those children who support the victim. Preschool outsiders are those children who are detached but without conviction encourage the bullies (Vlachou et al. 2011, 2013). In pro-bullying functions (e.g., bullies, assistants, reinforcers) children's point of view is more positive toward bullying (Salmivalli and Voeten 2004). They are insensitive toward the victims (Pöyhönen and Salmivalli 2008). Understanding the young children's different functions in bullying situations indicates the importance of putting bullying prevention programs into practice at an early age. Prevention and intervention programs that decrease bullying need to be used with young children as early as possible (Arseneault et al. 2006; Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012).

Anti-Bully Prevention Programs for Young Children

When bullying situations appear in the young children's school setting, interventions can offer them social and emotional skills that can help them avoid bullying behaviors and initiate a foundation to cultivate solid social relationships. Victimized children have difficulties establishing limits and effectively protect themselves (Bradshaw and Johnson 2011; Bradshaw et al. 2009). These children can benefit from special intervention programs that involve all adults. First, adults and non-involved peers need to identify bullying at its early stage to be able to intervene when a child is attacked.

Anti-bullying programs seem to be more successful with young children. Many whole-school intervention programs have been developed to decrease bullying. Table 2 shows

Table 2 Anti-Bully Prevention Programs for Young Children

Program	Age group	Purpose	Strategies
Olweus Bullying Prevention Program	8 years of age	Reduce bullying Help children enhance their peer relationships	Provide warmth, positive interest Only allow appropriate behaviors Focus on acceptable behaviors and reject disruptive behaviors Offer positive role models (Olweus 2005).
Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program	8 years of age	Help children develop anti bullying abilities	Acquire abilities to manage bullying Identify bullying and aggressive behaviors Become sensitive and responsive toward bullied children Develop positive social norms Respond by using socially acceptable behaviors in a bullying situation (Committee for Children 2005)
Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program	4–8 years of age	Develop social skills Decrease aggressive behavior Guide families with the prevention of bullying	Modeling Role playing Verbal discussion of appropriate behaviors Perspective taking skills Control impulsive behavior Anger management (Committee for Children 2014, 2015)
Bernese Program against Victimization (Be-Prox)	5–6 years of age	Modify the school environment Train teachers and other school staff Provide parent involvement Include everybody (e.g., children, families, community, school staff) in the prevention program (Yerger and Gehret 2011) Develop teachers' ability to manage bullying behavior and prevent victimization	Teachers: Are provided with information about victimization. Discuss pertinent information and its implications Are presented with explicit use of responsibilities Form groups to prepare the practical accomplishment of these responsibilities. Implement the components in the classroom for a specific period of time Convene and share their experiences on the implementation of protective procedures (Alsaker 2004; Alsaker and Valkanover 2001, 2012)

the anti-bullying programs for young children that are extensively used including (1) *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, (2) *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program*, (3) *Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program*, and (4) *Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School (Be-Prox)*, which the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has recommended for use in early childhood education programs (Snow 2014). Numerous research studies support these programs.

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Ages 8–15)

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) decreases bullying and assists in improving the peer relationships of elementary, middle, and junior high school students in their school and home environments. It is based

on four fundamental principles: (1) the adults' warmth, positive interest, and participation; (2) stringent parameters that explain unacceptable behaviors; (3) persistent concentration to nonphysical restrictions for acceptable behaviors, disturbances, or regulations; and (4) adults are considered authorities and positive role models (Olweus 2005).

Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program (Ages 8–10)

Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program focuses on relational types of aggression such as spiteful gossip and social segregation (Low et al. 2010) of children who are in the third, fourth, and fifth grades. Its components combine positive norms that create and reinforce policies to eradicate bullying and to encourage appropriate behavior. The

Steps to Respect program teaches children skills to deal with bullying, to recognize bullying and aggressive behaviors, to become sensitive toward bullied children, to generate positive social norms, and to respond with socially acceptable behaviors when they observe bullying behaviors (Committee for Children 2005).

Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program (Ages 4–14)

Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program is a social-skills program for children who are 4–14 years of age. They learn to diminish impulsive, high-risk, and aggressive behaviors and develop their socioemotional competence. Through modeling, practice, role playing, and developmentally appropriate verbal intervention strategies, young children learn perspective taking (empathy), impulse control, and anger management. The program includes “A Family Guide to Second Step[®]” and curricula for children who are in preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school, which includes first through fifth grades (Committee for Children 2014, 2015).

Bernese Program Against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School (Be-Prox)

The Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School (Be-Prox) is an anti-bullying and victimization program for young children. This thorough and practical approach is used to change the teachers’ attitudes and abilities to manage bullying and to generate positive principles that are necessary to promote the children’s interactions. Teachers learn how to deal with bullying behaviors and prevent victimization in a variety of situations in kindergarten and elementary classrooms (Alsaker 2004; Alsaker and Valkanover 2001, 2012). They are provided with a 4-month concentrated program that includes (1) supervision, (2) group discussions, and (3) shared support and collaboration between consultants and teachers and between teachers and parents (Alsaker 2004). Table 3 provides an example of this training (Alsaker 2004).

Anti-Bullying Programs

The majority of the anti-bullying programs are established on knowledge of social learning in relation to bullying and victimization instead of theories. Ttofi and Farrington (2008a, 2008b) propose the use of contemporary theories such as defiance theory and restorative justice approaches. For instance, faulty social relationships at school can be repaired through restorative justice techniques that include assembling all children (e.g., bullies, victims, bystanders,

other children) ‘in a participatory process that addresses wrongdoing while offering respect to the parties involved’ (Morrison 2007, p. 198).

Bully Prevention Resources

Early care and education networks at a national, state, and community levels have established prevention resources to improve the young children’s educational, social, and emotional health. They have joined their collaborative partners to establish ways to support, inform, and engage in community-wide bullying prevention strategies. They have become resources to prevent bullying. Below are examples of available resources that help in addressing the problem of bullying.

1. *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services* provides early education and child care providers a training module to stop bullying. It includes videos, games, publications, and many other resources for children, teachers, and parents. For more information, visit www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/training-center/hrsa_guide_early-education-child-care-providers_508v2.pdf
2. *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)* provides many resources to help provide high-quality care and developmentally appropriate services and resources in several areas including bullying. For more information, visit www.naeyc.org.
3. *Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)*. The PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center offers multiple activities and products that can be used worldwide. For more information, visit <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/nbpm/>
4. *Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families* provides information, training, and support to professionals, policymakers, and parents of infants and toddlers. It offers resources, brochures, and instructional webinars that help develop the young children’s social emotional skills and manage their aggressive behaviors. For more information, visit www.zerotothree.org.
5. *The ACT Raising Safe Kids Program* has been developed and coordinated by the American Psychological Association’s Violence Prevention Office. It teaches parents and caregivers positive skills to use with children whose age ranges from birth to age 8. For more information, visit <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org>
6. *Sesame Street Workshop* has a website that includes a video of Big Bird speaking about bullying. It also includes materials that can be used in a conversation

Table 3 Example of a teachers' training for the Bernese Program

Meetings	Topic	Training
First	Sensitization	Teachers describe bully and victim problems in their schools Teachers learn about the different kinds of aggression and the importance about working with parents
Second	Sensitization of the children and behavior code	Teachers establish limits and rules for preschool children Teachers discuss several behavior policies in their classroom that were established in partnership with the children Teachers prepare to discuss this information at the next meeting Teachers organize a parent meeting
Third	Making use of behavior code	Teachers share their experiences on utilizing classroom rules on anti bullying
Fourth	Making use of behavior code	Teachers describe the role and responsibility of children who were not involved in bullying and those who witnessed the bullying Teachers develop and share with others personality profiles of victims (both passive and aggressive) and bullies Teachers learn about all of the children's characteristics based on research findings Teachers methodically observe children who are and are not involved in bullying Teachers plan strategies to involve young children in ways to prevent victimization Teachers prepare the information to share at the next meeting
Fifth	Body awareness and concrete goals	Teachers learn research-based information about preschool children's motor development, body awareness, self-perceptions of strength, and peers' perceptions of strengths of victims and bullies Teachers use general dialogue and sharing of information to enhance the teachers' knowledge that help them modify these perceptions within the classroom setting Teachers establish goals including teaching children about empathy and body awareness, motivating all children to engage in a discussion about the situation in their classroom
Sixth	Consolidation through prevention goals	Teachers reflect on their established goals and share experiences on how to implement them in the classroom
Seventh	Open	Teachers suggest items to discuss at this meeting such as applying learning principles or providing positive reinforcement
Eighth	Feedback and further use of the program	Teachers replicate the previous meetings Teachers assess the goals that were attained, discuss how the problems can be managed, and complete the program

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with younger children about bullying and appropriate behavior in school and social settings. For more information, visit www.sesamestreet.org.

7. *Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI)* has resources on effective practices for the social-emotional development of young children who are at risk, have delays, or have disabilities. It also has teaching tools for teachers to help them develop competencies in teaching social-emotional skills. For more information, visit www.challengingbehavior.org.

Conclusions

At some point, almost everybody has observed bullying, victims, bystanders, or perpetrators. Developmentally, peer bullying surfaces as early as preschool. Olweus (1978,

1993) made a distinction between bullies and victims. Bullies have been described as hyperactive, impulsive, and encountering peer rejections, academic struggle, and having traumatic and strict home environments (Perren et al. 2009), but they represent a very small percentage (1–12 %) of children (Hymel and Swearer 2015). Preschool bullies are rooted in their peer group. Preschool children's lack of friends becomes a social risk factor for being victimized, which can deprive them of friendship or playmate relationships. Several of the characteristics for preschool bully–victims are usually socially unpleasant, which places them at a greater risk of engaging in bullying behaviors later in life. Stability of bully and victim roles fluctuate for preschool children.

Stereotypes of bullies as socially inept who depend on physical intimidation to settle disagreements have weakened as studies show extensive individual differences among bullies' characteristics. A number of bullies have

been found to be socially intelligent; therefore, they have high-status and hold an important social membership with their peers (Witvliet et al. 2010), indicating that some bullies (a) have social skills (Vaillancourt and Hymel 2004) and (b) are differentiated between socially marginalized and socially integrated bullies (Farmer et al. 2010). These attributes make it difficult to identify bullies. In addition, if bullying is considered to have high status and power in the peer group, bullies might prefer to continue displaying these aggressive behaviors rather than stop bullying their peers (Hymel and Swearer 2015).

The preschool children's personal and interpersonal characteristics that encourage problems in bullies and victims can be reduced with components of prevention and intervention programs that are appropriate for young children (Vlachou et al. 2011). Research results indicate that the social context or school environment influence both the rates of bullying and peer victimization as well as the effectiveness of preventive interventions (Bradshaw et al. 2009). Several studies have examined and found programs that are effective at preventing bullying and peer victimization at school (Bradshaw and Johnson 2011), although some of these studies (e.g., Farrington and Ttofi 2009) show mixed results for these bullying prevention programs. The prevention programs identified in these studies provide strategies that promote positive social interactions and a positive learning environment.

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