

Anti-bullying interventions in schools – what works?

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Introduction

Bullying in schools is an ongoing issue with significant negative long-term consequences for the students involved. A large and growing body of research indicates that although bullying is a difficult problem to shift, school-based interventions can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours. Evidence indicates that bullying is most effectively addressed through interventions that take a holistic, whole-school approach; include educational content that allows students to develop social and emotional competencies and learn appropriate ways to respond to bullying; provide support and professional development to teachers and other school staff; and ensure systematic program implementation and evaluation.

This review of the literature begins by defining bullying and outlining the prevalence and effects of bullying in schools. It then summarises the evidence on the overall effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions, before identifying and describing the characteristics common to effective interventions. The paper next describes a range of international and Australian examples of evidence-based anti-bullying strategies. Finally, the paper examines how schools can best be supported to identify what strategies will be most effective.

Background

The way in which schools and communities understand and define bullying strongly influences the approaches they will take to respond to the problem (Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group 2015). While there is no universally accepted definition of bullying, most researchers agree that bullying:

- involves repeated actions
- is intended to cause distress or harm
- is grounded in an imbalance of power (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011; Olweus 1993; Smith 2005).

Bullying is defined in the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) as:

an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying of any form or for any reason can have long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders. Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying. However, these conflicts still need to be addressed and resolved. (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2016)



A number of researchers caution against using labels such as 'bully' and 'victim' to describe the students involved in bullying behaviours (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011). This is both because of the risk that such negative labelling can be harmful to the student, and because it tends to over-emphasise the personal characteristics of individual students while under-emphasising the role of the school climate in contributing to bullying behaviour (Brown 2008). For this reason, the labels 'bully' and 'victim' are avoided in this paper in preference of descriptions of behaviours, for example 'student who bullies others', or 'student who experiences bullying'.

Bullying can be understood to occur in three forms: face-to-face bullying, covert bullying and online bullying. Face-to-face bullying, also called direct bullying, is overt and easier for adults to detect. It can include physical actions such as punching or kicking, and verbal actions such as name-calling and insulting (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011). Covert bullying, also called indirect bullying, is hidden from adults. It can include behaviours such as spreading rumours, excluding, threatening, blackmailing, whispering and stealing friends (Cross et al. 2009). Although covert bullying was previously perceived as less harmful than direct bullying, it is now recognised as having significant potential for serious harm (Cross et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2008a; Sourander et al. 2010). Online bullying, also called cyberbullying, is a specific type of covert bullying that uses electronic forms of contact (Smith et al. 2008a; Sourander et al. 2010). Online bullying is difficult for adults to detect or track, and can be particularly harmful to the targeted student because of the large potential audience (Slonje & Smith 2008; Stacey 2009).

Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that 14.8 per cent of Australian students reported being bullied at least a few times per month in 2015 (OECD 2017). There are well-established age and gender patterns in rates of bullying. Bullying appears to peak during the transition from primary school to high school because of the change in social hierarchies, before decreasing to relatively low levels by the end of high school (Nansel et al. 2001; Pellegrini 2002). Data indicates that while boys tend to bully more than girls (Natvig et al. 2001; Olweus 1997), girls tend to use more covert bullying than boys (Cillessen & Mayeux 2004; Crick & Grotpeter 1995).

Extensive research demonstrates that bullying can have serious short-term and long-term consequences, both for students who bully and for those who are bullied (for example, Bond et al. 2001; Rigby & Slee 1999; Ttofi & Farrington 2008). Negative consequences include feeling unsafe at school, psychological distress, lower levels of academic achievement and lower levels of school attendance. Students who bully others are also more likely to continue to bully others later in life and engage in risk-taking behaviours. Bullying has also been demonstrated to have a negative impact on students who witness bullying as bystanders¹.

How effective are anti-bullying interventions?

A range of meta-analyses exist that synthesise the findings of a significant number of evaluations of anti-bullying interventions. These meta-analyses include evaluations from a range of countries, and in both primary and high schools. They indicate that anti-bullying interventions can be effective at reducing bullying in schools, although the findings are mixed.

The most comprehensive meta-analysis of anti-bullying programs to date, conducted by Ttofi and Farrington (2011), found that anti-bullying programs are effective at reducing bullying behaviours by an average of 20-23 per cent and victimisation by 17-20 per cent. Similarly, Jiménez-Barbero et al. (2016) found that anti-bullying programs resulted in significant reductions in the frequency of bullying and victimisation. Lee, Kim and Kim (2015) also found that anti-bullying programs have a significant effect on reducing victimisation. Evans, Fraser and Cotter (2014) found that 50 per cent of the anti-bullying programs they assessed had significant effects on reducing bullying behaviours and 67 per cent had significant effects on reducing victimisation. J. David Smith et al. (2004), on the other hand, found that only a small number of programs yielded positive outcomes on bullying and victimisation; and Merrell et al. (2008) found mixed results in regards to changes in rates of bullying and victimisation.

¹ For a more detailed overview of the research on the consequences associated with students' experiences of bullying behaviours, see Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011, pp. 15-18.

What are the characteristics of effective anti-bullying interventions?

A number of clear themes emerge from the research that indicate what types of approaches are likely to have the strongest effect on reducing and preventing bullying in schools. Evidence indicates that successful anti-bullying interventions:

- take a holistic, whole-school approach
- include educational content that supports students to develop social and emotional competencies, and learn appropriate ways to respond to bullying behaviours
- provide support and professional development to teachers and other school staff on how best to maintain a positive school climate
- ensure systematic program implementation and evaluation²

The approaches that schools take to counter bullying can be classified as either 'preventative' or 'responsive'. Preventative approaches aim to stop bullying from occurring in the first place, while responsive approaches are the steps taken to resolve the problem after bullying has occurred. The two approaches are not entirely distinct: responsive approaches should also aim, for example, to prevent bullying behaviours from occurring again in future. Nonetheless, the two types of approaches are discussed separately here for the sake of clarity.

Preventative anti-bullying approaches

A whole-school approach

The problem of bullying extends far beyond schools, and is also embedded in the values and norms of wider society. In order to address bullying, then, it is necessary to take a holistic – whole-school and whole-community – approach. A holistic approach recognises that a positive school environment, which emphasises student wellbeing and reinforces a norm of inclusiveness and diversity, is crucial in preventing bullying.

Four key strategies emerge from the literature as particularly important components of a whole-school approach: establishing school-wide anti-bullying policies; focussing on preventing bullying in key environments including the classroom and playground; promoting a culture of reporting bullying; and partnering with parents and carers.

School-wide anti-bullying policies

An anti-bullying policy provides a framework for a consistent whole-school approach to bullying. A literature review by the Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC) Working Group described a school's anti-bullying policy as,

the vehicle to articulate the school community's shared understanding of bullying and how best to respond,

and the types of preventative and responsive strategies implemented by the school on the basis of this understanding. (2015, p. 64)

The meta-analysis by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that anti-bullying programs that included a whole-school anti-bullying policy were more strongly associated with a decrease in bullying than those that did not. The meta-analysis by Lee, Kim and Kim (2015) found, similarly, that school-based anti-bullying programs which included the establishment of a school policy on bullying had a significantly larger effect on victimisation than programs that did not.

In order to be effective, however, school anti-bullying policies need to be sufficiently comprehensive. A number of content analyses of schools' anti-bullying policies suggest that there are gaps in many policies (Marsh et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2008b). The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) identifies nine points that school anti-bullying policies should address:

- whole-school, collaboratively developed policies, plans and structures for supporting safety and wellbeing
- clear procedures that enable staff, parents, carers and students to report confidentially any incidents or situations of child maltreatment, harassment, aggression, violence or bullying
- clearly communicated procedures for staff to follow when responding to incidents of student harm from child maltreatment, harassment, aggression, violence, bullying or misuse of technology
- agreements for responsible use of technology by staff and students
- regular risk assessments of the physical school environment (including off-campus and outside school hours related activities), leading to the development of effective risk-management plans
- established and well-understood protocols about appropriate and inappropriate adult-to-student contact and interactions within the school context
- effective strategies for record keeping and communication between appropriate staff about safety and wellbeing issues
- a representative group responsible for overseeing the school's safety and wellbeing initiatives
- protocols for the introduction of casual staff, new staff and new students and families into the school's safety and wellbeing policies and procedures (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2016).

² These four categories are broadly based on Ansary et al. (2015), with some modifications.

School anti-bullying policies also need to be disseminated and implemented effectively by schools. Research by Hirsch, Lowen and Santorelli (2012) indicates that school anti-bullying policies can fail to make a practical difference to the lives of students who are being bullied if they are not well-developed, effectively implemented, and used as a 'living document' by the whole-school community. In a recent study of the prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies employed in Australian schools, Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that while 100 per cent of schools in their study had an anti-bullying policy, 52 per cent of students in the study did not know whether their school had an anti-bullying policy or thought it did not, and 35 per cent of parents in the study were unaware of the policy. In light of these findings, they recommend schools promote greater whole-school awareness of their anti-bullying policies, disseminate and discuss information relating to school anti-bullying policies more fully with students and parents, and inform parents about what the school is doing and how incidents involving their children are being handled (p. 79).

Focus on preventing bullying in key school environments

Establishing preventative strategies that target key environments in which bullying is known to occur – including the classroom and the playground – is an important means of developing a positive school climate. Pearce et al. argue that,

a well-designed, maintained and supervised school environment is shown to be important in countering bullying at school and promoting positive social interactions among students and staff. (2011, p. 11)

The research identifies a number of strategies that are effective at reducing bullying in the classroom. In their meta-analysis of the effectiveness of anti-bullying approaches, Ttofi and

Farrington (2011) found classroom management and classroom rules to be strongly associated with a reduction in bullying. Salmivalli notes that teachers play an important role in creating a classroom environment which is either conducive or inhibitive to bullying: 'Teachers' efforts to intervene in bullying, or lack of such efforts, may affect classroom norms regarding bullying and related behaviours' (2014, p. 288). In a study of 6,731 primary school students, Saarento et al. (2013) found that students were significantly more likely to be bullied in classrooms where the teacher was perceived to be less disapproving of bullying. In a survey of 7,318 high school students, Eliot et al. (2010) found that positive relationships between teachers and students increase the willingness of students to seek help for bullying. Rigby and Johnson found that teachers rated good classroom management as highly effective in reducing bullying, while surveillance of student behaviour by teachers was rated positively by over 80 per cent of students (2016, p. 69).

Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that school-based anti-bullying programs with high levels of playground supervision were significantly associated with reductions in bullying. A survey of 351 schools involved in a program for playground improvements, such as providing creative opportunities for students during recess and lunch times, found that 64 per cent of schools associated the improvement of their playgrounds with a reduction in bullying (Learning through Landscapes 2003). In their study of anti-bullying approaches in English schools, Thompson and Smith (2011) found that the majority of schools in their study used the strategy of improving playgrounds, and found it to have a positive effect on reducing bullying.



Promoting a culture of reporting bullying

A range of researchers state that promoting a culture of reporting bullying is an important means of preventing bullying behaviours in schools. The problem of convincing students to report incidents of bullying, however, is a significant challenge. Rigby and Johnson (2016) reported that while all schools in their study used this approach, only a minority of students being bullied actually seek help from teachers. The issue of reporting appears to be particularly problematic in the area of online bullying, where research consistently demonstrates that students are often reluctant to report instances of online bullying for fear that their computer or mobile phone will be removed from them (Campbell 2005; Cross et al. 2009; Stacey 2009).

Encouraging the reporting of bullying is central to successful anti-bullying interventions for two reasons. First, this approach is based upon the expectation that a culture of reporting will both deter some students from bullying others, and enable school staff to provide support to students involved in or experiencing bullying. Ansary et al. identify the need to develop 'a norm to report bullying to a responsible adult within the school, clearly distinguishing such telling from "snitching"' (2015, p. 32).

Second, establishing clear mechanisms for reporting and recording incidents of bullying is also an important way for schools and policy makers to track the extent and nature of bullying, and the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs. To this end, Cross et al. recommend establishing 'ongoing and routine data collection systems with standardised methods for defining and measuring covert and overt forms of bullying' (2009, p. xxxi). Thompson and Smith (2011) recommend having multiple reporting systems and a centralised recording system in place that are non-stigmatising and non-exposing, identify vulnerable students at intake, track student behaviour to target additional peer support, and provide evidence for the effectiveness of interventions.

Partnering with parents and carers

Involving parents and carers in schools' anti-bullying strategies is based on the recognition that bullying and other aggressive behaviours are learnt by children as they interact with their broader environments beyond school. Research consistently demonstrates that both family functioning (Baldry 2003; Bibou-Nakou et al. 2013; Espelage, Bosworth & Simon 2000; Rigby 1994) and the quality of the relationship between parent and child (Åman-Back & Björkqvist 2007; Georgiou & Stavrinides 2013; Holt, Kaufman Kantor & Finkelhor 2008; Spriggs et al. 2007) have a significant influence on children's risk of being involved in or experiencing bullying.

The meta-analysis of school-based anti-bullying policies by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that programs which included meetings with parents and carers were significantly associated with a reduction in bullying. Strategies that support parental or carer involvement can include regular newsletters, consultation on policies, and after-school clubs to support parents of at-risk students (Thompson & Smith 2011). Thompson and Smith found that strategies to facilitate parent and carer involvement were widely used by the English schools in their study, albeit with wide variation in practice. They found that the majority of schools had systems to involve parents and rated the strategy as having a positive effect on reducing bullying, although some schools experienced difficulties engaging parents. They recommended encouraging parent and carer involvement with an 'open door' policy for access to staff (p. 144). Research demonstrates, however, that schools can find it difficult to engage parents and carers in their anti-bullying work. In their study of Australian schools, Rigby and Johnson found,

the degree to which the schools collaborated with parents is difficult to gauge. A high proportion of parents invited to attend the school for group meetings to discuss issues did not attend and ... parents made numerous negative comments regarding the way cases were handled. (2016, p. 69)



Anti-bullying content in the classroom

The second category of approaches common to effective anti-bullying interventions is the inclusion of anti-bullying content in the classroom that allows students to develop social and emotional competencies and learn appropriate ways to respond to bullying. Research indicates that both teachers and students consider classroom-based anti-bullying content to be effective in reducing bullying. Thompson and Smith's (2011) study of schools and local authorities in England found that the majority of schools used classroom-based anti-bullying content to prevent bullying and rated it as having a positive effect. In their study of Australian government schools, Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that teachers' and students' evaluations of classroom-based anti-bullying strategies are overwhelmingly positive, with over half of students rating some aspects of classroom-based approaches as helpful in stopping bullying.

Anti-bullying content can be taught in the classroom through age-appropriate activities such as literature, audio-visual material and videos, drama and role play, music, debates, workshops, puppets and dolls (in early years), group work, and computer-based games where students can act out roles (Thompson & Smith 2012, p. 7; see also Perren et al. 2012). The meta-analysis by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found the use of video educational material for students in anti-bullying programs to be significantly associated with a reduction in victimisation. It should be emphasised, however, that such classroom-based approaches are not, by themselves, sufficient to prevent bullying. Rather, they should be seen as an important component within the framework of a multi-pronged, whole-school intervention.

The research indicates that classroom-based anti-bullying content is particularly effective when it focusses on two salient areas: developing students' social and emotional competencies, and encouraging positive bystander behaviour.

Social and emotional learning

There is broad agreement among educators and policy makers that schools have a crucial role not only in developing students' cognitive capacity, but also in fostering their social and emotional development (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan 2013; Durlak et al. 2011; Greenberg et al. 2003; Merrell & Gueldner 2010). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are a structured way to improve a wide range of students' social and emotional skills. They aim to develop five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioural competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning 2015).

A number of studies have shown that increased social and emotional competence is related to reductions in a variety of problem behaviours including bullying (Smith & Low 2013), as well as aggression, delinquency, substance use and dropout (Aspy et al. 2004; Bradshaw et al. 2009; Devaney et al. 2006; Moffitt et al. 2011; Noble & Wyatt 2008; Zins et al. 2004). A large meta-analysis of school-based SEL programs found that students who participated in SEL programs demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance, which represented an 11 percentage point gain in achievement (Durlak et al. 2011).

SEL programs have been shown to be an effective component of comprehensive anti-bullying interventions (Frey et al. 2005; Smith & Low 2013; Vreeman & Carroll 2007). The meta-analysis by Lee, Kim and Kim (2015) found that anti-bullying programs with training in emotional control have a significantly greater effect on victimisation than programs that do not. Smith and Low noted that SEL programs can work towards preventing bullying by helping students to develop skills in empathy, emotion management, social problem-solving and social competence, all of which 'can help orient youth toward more prosocial peer interaction and interpersonal problem solving, and provide students with strategies for coping effectively with peer challenges' (2013, p. 284).

SEL programs also have the capacity to contribute to the creation of a positive school climate that promotes the values of inclusiveness and tolerance of diversity. Two of the key competencies that SEL programs aim to develop – social awareness and relationship skills – are particularly relevant to promoting students' ability to empathise and maintain healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL 2015, pp. 5-6).

One of the main proponents of SEL in the United States (US) is CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), which promotes the adoption of SEL programs in US schools and produces a guide that identifies and rates evidence-based programs. In the United Kingdom (UK) an important example is SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), a whole-school approach to promoting social and emotional skills that is used in around 90 per cent of primary schools and 70 per cent of high schools in the UK (Humphrey, Lendrum & Wigelsworth 2010). Some examples of SEL programs in Australia include KidsMatter and MindMatters, discussed in further detail later in this review.

Promoting upstander behaviour

Research demonstrates that bystanders play a critical role in the group dynamics of bullying (Oh & Hazler 2009; Salmivalli 2014; Tremblow, Fonagy & Sacco 2004). Observational studies of school playgrounds demonstrate that in most instances of bullying there is a group of peers present (Hawkins, Pepler & Craig 2001; O'Connell, Pepler & Craig 1999). Rather than intervening on behalf of peers being bullied, however, many bystanders unintentionally reinforce the bully's behaviour through verbal or nonverbal cues which signal that bullying is acceptable, or even entertaining (Salmivalli 2010; Salmivalli et al. 1996).

For this reason, anti-bullying researchers are considering the reduction in rates of bullying that could potentially come from focussing on changing the behaviour of bystanders. The term 'upstander' is used to describe active bystanders who behave in ways to reduce or prevent bullying behaviour.

Bystander intervention training is an anti-bullying intervention that targets the group dynamics of bullying. The aim is to promote upstander behaviour by teaching students the skills that will enable them to shift from being passive bystanders to active defenders of bullied students. Interventions aimed at teaching students about upstander behaviour include strategies such as peer support programs designed to improve interpersonal problem-solving skills in students (Cowie & Hutson 2005), media such as videotaped re-enactments of bullying

situations that make students think about potential solutions (McLaughlin 2009; Schumacher 2007) and computer software that tracks students' progress within social scenarios and provides feedback on effective upstander behaviour (Evers et al. 2007; Salmivalli et al. 2013). Salmivalli (2014), a leading expert in the field of bystander behaviour, asserts that such programs should both raise students' awareness of the role bystanders have in the bullying process, as well as providing them with safe strategies to support the person being bullied, such as helping them to feel supported and included.

Ansary et al. identify the promotion of upstander behaviour as a 'core tenet' of effective anti-bullying programs (2015, pp. 31-32). A meta-analysis by Polanin et al. (2012) revealed that anti-bullying interventions that promote upstander behaviour were successful overall, and found such interventions to be more effective for older students. Thompson and Smith (2011) found that although upstander training was rarely used by the schools in their study, with only 53 out of 1,378 schools using this approach, both primary and high schools rated it as having a positive effect on reducing bullying. These results suggest that a focus on peer responses to bullying can indeed promote upstander behaviour by encouraging students to intervene on behalf of the student being bullied³.



3 It should be noted that, contrary to other research, Ttofi and Farrington observed in their meta-analysis (2011) that interventions involving work with peers (including strategies that encourage upstander behaviour, as well as peer mediation and peer mentoring strategies) were significantly associated with an increase in victimisation.

Teacher support and professional development

Providing effective support and professional development for school staff is the third essential component of effective anti-bullying strategies. Ansary et al. found that effective anti-bullying programs,

require school leadership to communicate and actively support modelling the expected behaviours as well as to maintain a nurturing school climate where safety is paramount and all members are engaged in the school community. (2015, p. 32)

In their meta-analysis of the effectiveness of anti-bullying approaches, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found teacher training to be significantly associated with a decrease in bullying. A study of 136 high school teachers in Finland found anti-bullying training to be a statistically significant factor in explaining teachers' responses to bullying (Sairanen & Pfeffer 2011).

Despite this relationship between teacher support and reductions in bullying, research indicates that teachers feel under-prepared to deal with bullying. A study of over 400 staff in Australian primary and secondary schools revealed that nearly 70 per cent of participants strongly agreed that staff in their school needed more training to address covert bullying, 50 per cent felt poorly or not at all skilled to deal with online bullying, and primary and female staff were particularly likely to feel

unskilled to address online bullying (Barnes et al. 2012).

These findings led the authors to conclude that there is 'an urgent need for sustainable professional development to enhance school staff understanding, skills and self-efficacy to address covert bullying' (p. 206).

Based on their study of English schools, Smith and Thompson recommended that an important element of anti-bullying best practice includes staff training. They assert, 'knowledge about bullying, and the range of anti-bullying interventions, should be a part of initial and ongoing teacher training, for a wide range of staff' (2011, p. 143). Their study of Australian schools also led Rigby and Johnson to recommend providing more anti-bullying professional learning for both pre-service and in-service teachers in order to increase teachers' knowledge of bullying and to develop the capacity of school staff to apply bullying interventions (2016, p. 79). The literature review by the SSSC Working Group concluded, similarly, 'Specific training appears to be necessary to assist teachers to distinguish between bullying and other types of conflict which may appear superficially similar' (2015, p. 56).



Systematic implementation and evaluation

A significant challenge associated with preventing bullying through school-based interventions is that such programs are often implemented incompletely or inconsistently within schools due to competing pressures and priorities. This ineffective implementation can result in less successful program outcomes.

There is increasing recognition that the success of public health and wellbeing interventions, including anti-bullying interventions, is strongly dependent on the degree to which such programs are implemented effectively. In a review of published studies on public health intervention evaluations, Durlak and DuPre reported that 'the magnitude of mean effect sizes are at least two to three times higher when programs are carefully implemented and free from serious implementation problems than when these circumstances are not present' (2008, p. 340). In relation to anti-bullying programs, the SSSC Working Group similarly reported:

As with all interventions, the fidelity of intervention is paramount for the successes that are suggested in research. Shortcuts and adaptations will inevitably lessen the positive effects of intervention programs if they erase or change the fundamental elements that research has identified as essential for effectiveness. The keenness with which many schools start out, and accompanying good intentions, can quickly be consumed or overtaken by other priorities in the school. (SSSC 2015, p. 75)

In their meta-analysis of the effectiveness of SEL programs in schools, Durlak et al. (2011) found ineffective program implementation to have a significant negative influence on program outcomes. In their evaluation of the KidsMatter program in Australian primary schools, Dix et al. (2012) also identified a significant positive relationship between the quality of program implementation and student academic performance. They found that the difference between high- and low-implementing schools was equivalent to a difference in academic performance of up to six months of schooling.

The problem of ineffective implementation means that monitoring and evaluation of anti-bullying interventions is particularly important. The meta-analysis of anti-bullying interventions by J Smith et al. (2004) found that programs in which implementation was systematically monitored tended to be more effective than programs without any monitoring. Slee et al. have developed an 'Implementation Index' in their evaluations of the KidsMatter and KidsMatter Early Childhood programs in order to assist schools to implement these programs effectively (Slee et al. 2009; Slee et al. 2012).

The index is structured around the three principles of fidelity, dosage and quality of delivery, and has found a positive relationship between schools' Implementation Index scores and parent and teaching ratings of their school's capacity to meet students' social, emotional or behavioural needs (Slee et al. 2009).

Responsive anti-bullying approaches⁴

Direct sanctions

Direct sanctions refer to negative consequences imposed upon students who are responsible for bullying. Sanctions can include verbal reprimands, meetings with parents, temporary removals from class, withdrawal of privileges, detentions, short-term suspension, and permanent expulsion (Thompson & Smith 2011). Research indicates that direct sanctions are the most commonly used strategy by schools in responding to cases of bullying. Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that direct sanctions were used in over 90 per cent of Australian schools in their study, while Thompson and Smith (2011) found that 92 per cent of English schools use this approach.

Evidence of the effectiveness of direct sanctions in reducing bullying is mixed. On the one hand, the meta-analysis by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) identified 'firm disciplinary methods' as being significantly related to reductions in bullying. Yet, despite being widely used, direct sanctions were given the lowest effectiveness rating of all the responsive approaches used by Australian schools (Rigby & Johnson 2016). A number of researchers assert that direct sanctions are not a preferred response to bullying because they coerce students into behaving in a way that is required of them, rather than providing students with the opportunity to be involved in developing a positive resolution to the problem. Direct sanctions may therefore be less likely to prevent bullying from recurring in the long run. Rigby argues, 'Available evidence suggests that the use of Direct Sanctions is no more successful than alternative strategies in addressing cases of bullying and may result in less sustainable outcomes' (2014, p. 409). Smith and Thompson argue that, to be effective, direct sanctions 'need to be expressed as a clear set of consequences in a school's anti-bullying policy and used in the framework of other more restorative approaches' (2014, n.p.).

Restorative practice

Restorative practice is based on the concept of restorative justice, and prioritises repairing harm done to relationships over the need to assign blame and dispense punishment (Wong et al. 2011). In a restorative approach, students responsible for bullying are required to attend a meeting along with the student being bullied.

4 The responsive approaches described here represent those strategies that emerged from the literature as having the most substantial empirical evidence to demonstrate their effectiveness. It is worth noting, however, that there are also a number of emerging approaches that are currently being considered by researchers. One such example, which is showing promise in the preliminary research, is Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI is a technique aimed at identifying the motivations behind an individual's problem behaviour, and then directing them to more socially appropriate ways of achieving their goals (see, for example, Cross 2017; Juhnke et al. 2013; Lundahl et al. 2010).

The bullied student is invited to describe what has been happening and how they have been affected, while the student responsible for bullying is invited to describe what they were thinking at the time and what they think now. The student responsible for bullying is then asked what should be done next, with the expectation that they will act 'restoratively' with an apology and some act of reparation (Rigby 2014, p. 412).

The use of restorative practice is increasing in schools. Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that restorative approaches were used by over 90 per cent of Australian schools in their study, while Thompson and Smith's (2011) study indicated that 69 per cent of English schools employ the approach.

They found that around 20 per cent of bullying cases in English schools are handled through a restorative approach, with a higher proportion in secondary schools than in primary. According to reports from schools, restorative approaches were successful in stopping the bullying from continuing in 73 per cent of cases, with a much higher effectiveness rate in secondary schools (86%) than in primary schools (24%) (Thompson & Smith 2011). Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that the Australian schools in their study gave restorative approaches the highest effectiveness rating of all the responsive approaches used, with a rating of 4.14 out of 5.

Mediation

In a mediation approach, the student responsible for bullying and the student being bullied are both invited to participate in a mediation session. The mediator can be either a member of staff or a peer trained in the method. Each student is invited to 'tell their story' while the other listens without interrupting, after which the mediator repeats each story accurately to the satisfaction of each student. The students are then asked to suggest possible ways in which the conflict can be resolved, before working through the suggestions to identify which proposal can be agreed on (Rigby 2014, p. 413).

While evaluative reports suggest that mediation can be highly effective in resolving certain types of conflict between students (Johnson, Johnson & Dudley 1992), it does not appear to be well suited to resolving cases of bullying. This is because bullying involves a more powerful person deliberately causing harm to another, and Rigby argues that mediation is therefore 'of practical value in relatively few cases of actual bullying' because perpetrators of bullying 'typically are not interested in being "mediated"' (2014, p. 413). Perhaps surprisingly in light of this, Rigby and Johnson found that mediation was used in all schools in their study and given an effectiveness rating of 4.04 out of 5, although they noted that the term 'mediation' may have been interpreted by teachers in the study in a broad sense, rather than in the specific sense that it is used in anti-bullying literature (2016, p. 39, p. 70).

Support Group Method

The 'Support Group Method', developed by Robinson and Maines (2008), aims to resolve bullying behaviour without the high degree of coercion evident in either direct sanctions or restorative practice. The method is seen as particularly relevant to cases in which a number of students are involved in bullying another student. It begins with an interview with the student being bullied, in which the student is offered support and asked to describe what has been happening and how they have been affected. The student is assured that nobody will be punished, and is asked to name the students responsible for bullying them. A meeting is then held with the students responsible for bullying, together with a number of other students expected to act as supporters of the student being bullied. The practitioner shares what the bullied student has described about their distress, emphasises the responsibility of those present to improve the situation, and requires each student to indicate what they will do to help (Rigby 2014, p. 414).



The Support Group Method does not appear to be widely used, perhaps due to schools' lack of familiarity with the process and a lack of available training. Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that the method was used occasionally by 60 per cent of Australian schools in their study, while Thompson and Smith (2011) found that only around ten per cent of English schools in their study employ it. Of those schools that did use the approach, Australian schools gave it an effectiveness rating of 3.92 out of 5 (Rigby & Johnson 2016), while English schools gave it a slightly higher rating of 4.20 out of 5 and considered it to be successful at stopping bullying in 76 per cent of cases (Thompson & Smith 2011).

Method of Shared Concern / Pikas Method

The Method of Shared Concern was designed by psychologist Anatol Pikas (2002) and is used in a variety of countries including Sweden, Spain, Scotland, England and Australia (Rigby 2014). It is a non-punitive approach for working with groups of students involved in bullying, and seeks to empower students to negotiate a solution to the issue through a series of meetings with a trained practitioner (Rigby & Griffiths 2011, p. 348). It begins with a series of one-to-one interviews with the students suspected of bullying, in which the practitioner shares a concern about the student being bullied without making any accusations of the interviewee, seeks some acknowledgement that the bullied student is experiencing distress, and asks how the interviewee can help improve the situation. Once there

has been an improvement in the situation, a meeting is held between all the students responsible for the bullying to enable them to plan how they will resolve the situation and reduce the distress of the student they have bullied. An individual meeting with the bullied student is then held to offer support and explore the situation from that student's point of view. Finally, a meeting is held with all the students concerned, when the students responsible for the bullying offer their proposed solution to the student who has been bullied (Rigby 2005, pp. 29-30).

Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that the Method of Shared Concern was used in 60 per cent of Australian schools in their study, while Thompson and Smith (2011) found that the method was only used in around five per cent of English schools in their study. Research indicates that this approach can be successful in reducing bullying in schools. In a small-scale evaluative study in Australia based on 17 applications of this approach, Rigby and Griffiths (2011) found that the students responsible for bullying almost invariably indicated that they would act to help improve the situation for the student being bullied. In this study, 15 of the 17 cases were resolved. This positive outcome is consistent with other reports; Australian schools that used the approach gave it an effectiveness rating of 3.83 out of 5 (Rigby & Johnson 2016), while English schools gave it an effectiveness rating of 4.14 out of 5 and considered it to be the most effective responsive approach that schools employ (Thompson and Smith 2011).



International examples of whole-school anti-bullying interventions

There is a multitude of school-based anti-bullying programs around the world, however, not all are grounded in evidence-based practice or supported by program evaluations. The four programs described in this section have been selected because they embody each of the common characteristics of effective anti-bullying interventions identified in this review, and because they have been subjected to program evaluations.

OBPP – Olweus Bullying Prevention Program – Norway

Created by Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus, OBPP aims to reduce and prevent bullying in schools by focussing on the whole-school, classroom, individual and community levels (Limber 2012). The program guides schools to restructure their environment to reduce opportunities and rewards for bullying and build a sense of community among students and adults in the school community (Olweus 1993).

The program is supported by a significant body of research. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found in their meta-analysis that programs based on the work of Olweus were among the most effective anti-bullying approaches. The OBPP has demonstrated effectiveness in Norway, where it has been implemented widely (Limber 2011; Olweus 1991, 1997; Olweus & Alsaker 1991; Olweus & Kallestad 2010; Olweus & Limber 2010). A long-term quasi-experimental study with around 3,000 students in Oslo, for example, found 40 per cent reductions in self-reports of victimisation and 51 per cent reductions in self-reports of bullying (Olweus & Limber 2010). Evaluations of OBPP in the US, however, have found the program to have more limited effectiveness in that country (Bauer, Lozano & Rivara 2007; Black & Jackson 2007; Limber et al. 2004; Melton et al. 1998; Olweus & Limber 2010; Pagliocca, Limber & Hashima 2007), largely due to challenges in program implementation (Ansary et al. 2015).

Sheffield Anti-Bullying Project – England

The Sheffield project was implemented in 23 schools in Sheffield, England, from 1991 to 1993 (Smith & Ananiadou 2003). The project was underpinned by a whole-school focus, and emphasised the importance of students, staff, families and the broader community in addressing bullying. It used strategies including staff training, explicitly addressing bullying through the school curriculum, and emphasising social and emotional learning (Ansary et al. 2015). The project was broadly based on the OBPP, but was modified for use in English schools. The key differences were that it allowed schools to tailor the program to meet their specific needs, had a strong emphasis on peer support, and emphasised the use of the Pikas method (Smith & Ananiadou 2003). The components of the project included: whole-school policy development; curriculum-based strategies; direct work with pupils; and making changes to playgrounds and lunch breaks (P Smith et al. 2004).

Program evaluations of the Sheffield project were generally positive. After four school terms, primary schools achieved an average 17 per cent reduction in the number of students being bullied and a seven per cent reduction in students who reported bullying others, while secondary schools achieved a three to five per cent reduction in students who reported bullying others (Smith & Ananiadou 2003). Some results, however, suggest that certain schools found slight increases in bullying behaviours, especially where the program was implemented with less fidelity (Eslea & Smith 1998).

SAVE Project – Sevilla Anti-Violencia Escolar (Seville Anti-Bullying in School Project) – Spain

The SAVE project was introduced in primary and secondary schools in Seville, Spain, from 1995. The SAVE project takes a whole-school approach and has a strong theoretical foundation in an ecological perspective, in which the school is seen as a community of distinct ‘microsystems’ including teachers, students, their families and the broader community (Ortega & Lera 2000). SAVE is strongly focussed on social and emotional learning, which it aims to foster through: a democratic management of interpersonal relationships within the school; cooperative group work; educating students about feelings, attitudes and values; and direct intervention with students at risk of or involved in bullying (Ortega & Lera 2000). The project also has a strong emphasis on teacher training, and requires that teachers develop their own anti-bullying materials on a yearly basis (Ortega, del Rey & Mora-Merchán 2004).

Evaluations of the SAVE project using questionnaires administered to students both before and after the intervention found that participation in the program resulted in a reduction in victimisation by more than half from 9.1 per cent to 3.8 per cent, a reduction in the rate of bullying from 4.5 per cent to 3.8 per cent, and a reduction in the number of students who had both perpetrated and experienced bullying from 0.7 per cent to 0.3 per cent (Ortega, del Rey & Mora-Merchán 2004).

KiVa Anti-Bullying Program – Finland

The KiVa program (an acronym for the Finnish ‘Kiusaamista Vastaan’, meaning ‘against bullying’) is a national anti-bullying program funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and developed at the University of Turku (Kärnä et al. 2011). It was introduced in a small number of intervention schools across grades four through six during 2007-2008, and has since undergone widespread implementation, with 90 per cent of Finnish schools participating as of 2011 (Salmivalli et al. 2013).

KiVa uses a combination of preventative and responsive approaches, and has three different versions that are developmentally appropriate at different grade levels, for ages 7-9, 10-12 and 13-15 (Kärnä et al. 2011). The program’s preventative actions include classroom lessons, an anti-bullying computer game aimed at teaching students appropriate ways to respond in bullying situations, and providing prominent symbols throughout the school such as posters and bright vests for recess supervisors to signal that bullying is taken

seriously. The program's responsive approaches include establishing teams of teachers to address individual cases of bullying, and handling cases through an established process. The program also includes training days and school network meetings to support teachers and schools to implement the program (Kärnä et al. 2011).

KiVa is supported by a significant body of evidence (Kärnä et al. 2011; Salmivalli, Garandeau & Veenstra 2012; Salmivalli, Kärnä & Poskiparta 2011; Williford et al. 2012). For example, an evaluation of the KiVa program by Kärnä et al. (2011) using a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design with a sample of 8,237 students aged 10-12 found that after nine months of implementation, the intervention was effective in reducing victimisation, and had smaller effects on reducing bullying.

Australian examples of whole-school anti-bullying interventions

As with international anti-bullying programs, there are a large number of school-based anti-bullying programs available in Australia. Again, the four Australian programs described here have been identified because they embody the characteristics common to effective anti-bullying interventions, and because they have been subjected to program evaluations.

NSSF – National Safe Schools Framework

The NSSF is the national anti-bullying framework for Australian schools. It is aligned to the Australian curriculum and is supported by all Australian educational jurisdictions. The NSSF is an evidence-based framework made up of nine elements for a whole-school approach to address the problem of bullying. These include:

- Leadership commitment to a safe school
- A supportive and connected school culture
- Policies and procedures
- Professional learning
- Positive behaviour management
- Engagement, skill development and safe school curriculum
- A focus on student wellbeing and student ownership
- Early intervention and targeted support
- Partnerships with families and community (Ministerial Council for Education, Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011; Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood 2013).

Research indicates that the NSSF has not influenced schools' practice widely, despite it being the national anti-bullying framework. Rigby and Johnson (2016) found that less than half of the schools in their study had used the NSSF to assist them in developing their school anti-bullying policy. In a review of an earlier version of the NSSF, Cross et al. similarly observed that schools had not widely implemented the safe school practices recommended by the framework. They found:

schools appear not to have widely implemented the recommended safe school practices, teachers appear to need more training to address bullying, especially covert bullying, and bullying prevalence among students seems relatively unchanged compared to Australian data collected 4 years prior to the launch of the NSSF. (Cross et al. 2011a, p. 398)

PBL – Positive Behaviour for Learning

Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), also known as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS), is being implemented in some Australian schools (SSSC 2015). PBL does not specifically address bullying. Rather, it is a whole-school framework aimed at fostering positive behaviour in general, which has been shown to have a positive effect on reducing bullying.

PBL emphasises proactively and explicitly teaching positive behaviour and pro-social skills, rather than just reacting to inappropriate behaviour (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports 2017). The approach involves establishing a three tiered continuum of behaviour supports, which intensifies as required to meet the needs of each student. The first tier is focussed on universal prevention, the second tier involves interventions that focus on students with additional academic or social and emotional learning needs, and the third tier involves working intensively with a small number of students who experience chronic academic and behavioural difficulties (Hieneman et al. 2005; Positive Behaviour for Learning 2017; Pugh & Chitiyo 2012; Sugai et al. 2000).

Research on PBL in the US has yielded evidence of a reduction in bullying behaviours (Good, McIntosh & Gietz 2011; SSSC 2015). A small program evaluation found a 72 per cent decrease in reported incidents of bullying (Ross & Horner 2014), while a larger RCT in the US state of Maryland found that students in PBL schools displayed significantly less teacher-reported bullying behaviour than other students (Waasdorp, Bradshaw & Leaf 2012).

Friendly Schools

Friendly Schools emerged from extensive longitudinal research developed and conducted out of Curtin University in Perth from 1999 (Cross et al. 2004). The program includes a whole-school framework and a bullying prevention program based on fostering social and emotional learning skills and resilience, and through schools implementing evidence-based policy and practice. Friendly Schools was designed to align with both the Australian Curriculum and the NSSF, and aims to bring the whole school community together in order to create and maintain a friendly and safe school culture (Friendly Schools 2017; Pearce 2014).

The first program evaluation of Friendly Schools was a three-year RCT implemented in 2000 in 29 schools in Western Australia. The results indicated that students in the program were significantly less likely to be bullied than comparison students and were also significantly more likely to report bullying when it occurred, although there was no difference in self-reported rates of bullying (Cross et al. 2004; Cross et al. 2011b). A second RCT was conducted between 2002 and 2004, and found that grade four students who participated in the program were significantly less likely to be bullied than comparison students and were significantly less likely to bully others, although there were no significant effects on their likelihood of reporting bullying when it occurred (Cross et al. 2012).

KidsMatter and MindMatters

KidsMatter is a mental health and wellbeing framework for primary schools. The program has since been adapted to include KidsMatter Early Childhood, which focusses on early childhood services, and MindMatters, which focusses on secondary school students.

The programs were designed in Australia through a partnership between education and health sectors, and are funded by the Australian government and beyondblue. While the programs do not directly address bullying, they offer a broad framework through which schools can develop a whole-school approach to teaching social and emotional learning skills, engaging the families of students, and identifying support networks for students experiencing mental health problems (KidsMatter 2017).

A number of evaluations have been published on the impact of KidsMatter, which all attest to its value in positively influencing change in school culture (Askill-Williams et al. 2008; Dix, Jarvis & Slee 2013; Slee et al. 2009; Slee et al. 2012; Spears and Dix 2008). An evaluation by Slee et al. (2009), for example, found that KidsMatter was associated with improvements in teachers' knowledge, competence and confidence in supporting students with mental health difficulties; more effective parenting, and more supportive and caring family relationships; students' social and emotional competencies; and students' mental health. Although no empirical research has focussed specifically on the impact of KidsMatter on bullying (SSSC 2015), the program has clear relevance to anti-bullying approaches in schools given the well-established link between bullying and mental health and wellbeing (for example, Slee & Murray-Harvey 2011).



How can schools identify what will work?

In order to maximise the outcomes of anti-bullying interventions, schools need support to identify what interventions are likely to be successful based on their specific contexts and requirements. Ansary et al. identify a range of 'core tenets' nested within four broad categories which 'represent the active ingredients that appear to account for reductions in bullying and victimisation' (2015, p. 30). These include:

- A holistic theoretical approach with:
 - an ecological perspective as a theoretical foundation, which addresses the various contexts in which students move in and out of school on a daily basis (for example, family, community, etc.)
 - an emphasis on a whole-school approach in which anti-bullying messages are presented in multiple ways (for example, curriculum, policies, etc.)
 - a focus on developing a positive school climate in which the values, norms and practices of the school reflect an ethos of caring and respect for one another and for the school community.
- Program content with:
 - a focus on social and emotional learning
 - a focus on promoting and supporting positive bystander behaviour
 - developmental trends associated with prevalence rates of bullying as well as strategies that increase in sophistication as youth mature.
- Leadership and team management that supports school staff to communicate and actively support modelling the expected behaviours as well as to maintain a nurturing school climate.
- Program effectiveness strategies with:
 - systematic assessment and evaluation of changes in bullying activities over time
 - coordination of anti-bullying efforts and sustainability.

While Ansary et al. provide advice on the broad features of successful anti-bullying programs, there is little available in the way of more specific advice to guide schools in their choice of individual anti-bullying programs.

One exception to this general lack of specific advice is in regard to SEL programs. For example, there is a 'Program Guide' available on the KidsMatter website (KidsMatter Primary 2017) which identifies over 100 SEL programs; enables schools to filter their search of programs by a range of factors; and provides an overview of each program, its implementation, and evidence of its effectiveness. While the KidsMatter Program Guide is limited to SEL programs, it could potentially be replicated to guide schools on the selection of anti-bullying programs more broadly.

Conclusion

Bullying in schools can be linked to a range of negative outcomes for the students involved, both immediately and in the long-term. A significant body of evidence is now available to demonstrate, however, that school-based anti-bullying interventions can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours. Effective anti-bullying interventions are characterised by a whole-school approach, evidence-based educational content, support and professional development for teachers, and rigorous program implementation and evaluation.



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