

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in High Schools: A Review of Literature

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The purpose of this research brief is to summarize the literature on bullying among high school students and provide information about available research on the application of bullying prevention programs, including the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, in American high schools.

Concerns about Bullying

Bullying, a form of aggression,^{1,2} refers to actions repeatedly performed that are designed to harm or disturb another person, who is in a less powerful position.^{1,3} Bullying behaviors encompass a broad range of activities including verbal and physical bullying, social exclusion, racial and sexual bullying, and more recently, cyberbullying (i.e., bullying via cell phone and/or the Internet, sexting).^{4,5} Boys are more often the victims of physical bullying while girls are more often the victims of relational bullying.⁶⁻⁸ In general, self-reports of bullying victimization peak during the ages of 11-13 years and then decline throughout the high school years,^{9,10} depending upon the type of bullying. For example, indirect forms of bullying (e.g., sexual harassment, dating aggression) and cyberbullying are more frequently reported by youth in high school.¹⁰⁻¹²

Bullying experiences, either as a victim and/or perpetrator, have been identified as significant health issues for children and youth due to its short- and long-term effects on mental, physical and psychological health.^{1,6,13-16} To expand, school bullying is associated with an array of negative consequences, ranging from emotional health problems to physical health problems,^{3,6,15,16} and in the extreme, suicide and school shootings.^{17,18} Some of these effects are immediate and include engaging in other risk behaviors during adolescence (e.g., substance use,⁶ risky sexual practices,^{19,20} behavioral problems²¹) and less academic success,^{22,23}

while others, such as depression,²⁴ substance abuse,¹³ and criminal activity,²⁵ are long-term, persisting into adulthood.^{6,13} Moreover, these effects are not limited to the victims, but also may include the bully/bullies and bystander(s).²⁶

Bullying in American High Schools

To date, the majority of research has focused on adolescents in middle and lower grades. As a result, less is known about bullying among high school students. Yet, as recent media reports reveal, older adolescents are not immune to bullying and bullying at the high school level can have devastating effects.²⁷

Prevalence data on school bullying suggests that it is a widespread phenomenon, even at the high school level. A few researchers have examined bullying among high school students and report a wide range of bullying experiences.²⁸ In studies that included nationally representative samples of high school students, anywhere from 20% to 50% of high school students reported school bullying experiences.²⁹ Recent data from the National Crime Victimization Survey provides higher estimates of students' bullying experiences, with between 30-32% of youth 12-18 years of age reported bullying experiences.^{30,31} The variability in rates reflects the lack of consensus for defining and measuring the construct of bullying.³²

In Pennsylvania, 19.2% of high school youth reported bullying incidents on school property within the previous year²⁹ with rates highest among 9th graders (24.5%) and lowest among 12th graders (13.4%). Data from the 2009 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS)³³ revealed non-physical forms of bullying as the most common, with 51.4% of victimized students reporting that their bullying experiences involved lies and rumors. Similar to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System conducted by the

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Pennsylvania data rates were highest for 8th graders and lowest for 12th graders for all types of bullying, except cyberbullying.³³ Rates of digital bullying increased with age, peaked at 10th grade (11.8%) with identical rates reported by students in 8th and 12th grades (10.7%).³³

Bullying Prevention Programs in High Schools

In an effort to address bullying, the states enacted anti-bullying legislation and local education agencies enacted anti-bullying policies.^{34,35} According to the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (2011),³⁶ 45 states have enacted anti-bullying legislation, an increase from 2007 when only 35 states had enacted anti-bullying legislation.³⁵ Recognizing that bullying and peer victimization are systemic problems, the focus has been on the development and implementation of school-based, anti-bullying programs.³⁷ The value of a whole-school approach to bullying became the focus worldwide of intervention/prevention programs after Dan Olweus's successful intervention in Bergen, Norway with youth in grades 3-10.^{14,38} Since Olweus's ground-breaking work,^{14,22,38,39} the whole-school approach to bullying has been widely implemented in the U.S.^{3,40}

There have been several published reviews of the effectiveness of school-based bullying prevention programs,^{2,40-49} which have led to contradictory conclusions about the utility of such programs. In general, it appears that whole-school strategies are most effective in enhancing students' levels of social competence and self-esteem, increasing teachers' awareness of bullying and its detrimental impact, and promoting anti-bullying attitudes.^{2,50} However, limited changes in bullying and victimization behaviors and rates have been reported.^{2,37,41,44-46} Examination of these

reviews reveals that quality program implementation, training and technical support are vital to behavioral change.^{2,26,41,47,48} Thus, despite the varying impact/success of these programs, the consensus remains that school-based, anti-bullying prevention/intervention programs are essential.¹⁶

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is one of few programs that has been identified as an evidence-based program^{39,47,49} recognized by the Blueprints for Violence Prevention initiative as a quality violence and drug prevention program with a high scientific standard of effectiveness.^{31,44} As a result, OBPP has been widely disseminated in the U.S. The OBPP is a whole-school, systems-change program that focuses on school, classroom, individual and community levels.^{39,50} The goals of OBPP are to reduce bullying behaviors, prevent the development of bullying behaviors, and improve the school's climate among students.^{1,3,4,39,51-53} Studies conducted in Norway with youth in grades 3-10 found that as a result of implementing OBPP, schools reported lower rates of bullying behaviors, decreased rates of antisocial behaviors (e.g., vandalism, truancy), and an improved school climate.^{1,3,4,51} Evaluations of OBPP in the U.S. have not consistently found OBPP to impact bullying and victimization behaviors,^{2,54,55} which likely stem from poor program implementation quality, lack of administrative support, excluding parents from the process, and an insufficient amount of technical assistance.^{2,22,39,41,53,56} Some studies suggest that OBPP may be most effective in increasing teachers' responsiveness to bullying incidents, decreasing suspension rates, and reducing bullying behaviors among elementary school-aged students versus older students.²

To date, we are not aware of any published peer-reviewed research studies regarding the efficacy of OBPP for high school students. Preliminary analyses of data collected from high school students in Pennsylvania has been encouraging with significant reductions in bullying rates reported by schools.^{39,57} Data from the

Highmark Foundation's State of Bullying Report revealed that among high school students surveyed (from 3 high schools in cohort 1 and 13 schools in cohort 2), rates of bullying others 2-3 times per month or more, ranged from 13.5-17% in 2007 and from 10.6-11.5% in 2009.⁵⁷ In addition, at the end of 12 or more months of OBPP implementation, a larger proportion of students reported positive bystander behavior and that adults at school "often" or "almost always" try to stop bullying.⁵⁷

Conclusions and Next Steps

Prevalence data suggest that many high school-aged youth experience bullying and are at risk of associated negative outcomes. While there is limited research on the effectiveness of whole-school programs to address bullying behavior in American high schools,^{58,59} common elements for successful school-based anti-bullying programs have been identified.^{41,45,55,57,60-64} These include such things as:

- Whole systems approaches that consist of the school, community and family environment
- Specific activities and measures tailored for the particular setting
- Adequate monitoring of program implementation, including multiple sources of data
- Effective and ongoing school staff training
- Educating parents about bullying issues and engaging them in bullying prevention efforts
- Clearly delineated disciplinary methods
- Sufficient program duration

To address the need for bullying prevention among high school students in Pennsylvania, an advisory group comprised of Olweus Bullying Prevention Program certified trainers was convened to identify supplemental resources and curriculum support materials for use with high school students consistent with the OBPP. The selected resources reflect developmental considerations,^{10,62} increases in cognitive capacities/abilities,^{41,59} and issues specific to the high school context.^{10,57,59,65} Schools that wish to access these resources

may do so through consultation with a Certified Olweus Trainer (to find an OBPP trainer in Pennsylvania, go to www.safe-schools.info/bullying-prevention/locate-a-trainer).

In light of preliminary research findings, high schools that choose to implement the OBPP should do so with careful attention to program fidelity with minimal deviation from the original OBPP model. Future evaluations should consider the extent to which OBPP program components may be adapted within a high school setting. This includes a rigorous evaluation^{66,67} of the efficacy of any new materials/methods proposed for use with high school students. Such evaluations are likely to be contingent upon the availability of funding to support research of the model at the high school level. ■

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Highmark Foundation Partnership

In the past five years, the Highmark Foundation provided more than 350 Pennsylvania elementary, middle and high schools – with a total student population of more than 240,000 – with the tools and resources needed to implement the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP).

Through a unique partnership with the Highmark Foundation, the Center for Safe Schools created the PA CARES (Pennsylvania Creating an Atmosphere of Respect and Environment for Success) Initiative, a dedicated opportunity to build local school readiness and capacity for the successful implementation of the research-based OBPP and other proven intervention strategies. For more information about the Highmark Foundation, go to www.highmark.com.

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