

## **PREVENTING SOCIAL AGGRESSION IN SCHOOLS: IMPACT OF *STEPS TO RESPECT* [5215]**

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### **Abstract**

Eruptions of bullying in schools that result in significant injury prompt extended features on the topic across the news media. But these stories are no longer sensational. Considering the likely 25 percent prevalence of mental health disorders (Satcher 2000) and easy access to guns, interpersonal conflicts between young people are increasingly likely to result in serious injury or death across an array of participants (Fein et al. 2002). Since schools are a central resource for socialization and support to youth, their enthusiastic involvement in universal bullying prevention and social skill instruction is critical. Administrators need to learn which interventions are effective, and also which ones are easily implemented. This study evaluated *Steps to Respect*, a promising bullying prevention curriculum.

### **Significance**

The process of bullying involves a dynamic that injures all the people involved. There are three central roles in bullying: the bully, the victim, and bystanders (Olweus 1991). Both bullies and victims are likely to suffer loneliness, alienation, and reduced self-esteem (Paquette and Underwood 1999; Prinstein, Boergers, and Vernberg 2001). Bystanders are violating their own code of ethics by passively reinforcing others' antisocial behavior. This implicit condoning of aggression exerts enormous ramifications on the health of our society, and teaching students about their role as bystanders can empower them to disrupt the cycle of bullying, victimization, and reinforcement of the bully.

Denial of the problem of bullying can take several forms: one is the belief that it is a normal part of socialization and adolescent development; another is that youth will naturally overcome a "stage" in their natural course of development; yet another is that it doesn't happen with any regularity or severity. Each of these beliefs is false.

Naming and understanding bullying may serve to antidote the pernicious cycle of bullying. Also, teaching kids how to recognize bullying and how to determine an appropriate response to it may impact its prevalence and victims' response to it (Dill et al. 2004; Olweus 1991) The *Steps to Respect* bullying prevention curriculum shows promise as an effective and engaging program in a ready-to-use format that includes posters, overheads, main lessons, skill practice sessions, booster lessons, and a literature component. Use of the curriculum is widespread, yet evaluation of its effectiveness by outside sources remains a gap in the literature. We implemented a mixed-model quasi-experimental design study to evaluate effectiveness, the impact of fidelity of implementation, and teachers' support and evaluation.

### **Method**

Student self-report questionnaires, observations of teachers implementing the curriculum, and interviews with teachers included a balance of quantitative and qualitative information that add precision and depth to our results. Researchers based design choices upon recommendations from prior research and adapted them to available resources (Chambless and Hollon 1998; Frey, Hirschstein, Snell, Van Schoiack Edstrom, MacKenzie, and Broderick 2005; Van Schoiack Edstrom, Hirschstein, Frey, Snell, and MacKenzie 2004).

## Setting and Participants

We recruited fifteen third through fifth grade classrooms with 364 students in six mostly-rural elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest. Student participants included 364 individuals ages 8-11 in grades 3 through 5. Classrooms were divided between those implementing the *Steps to Respect* curriculum (Committee for Children 2001) and comparison classrooms. Intervention and comparison classrooms were in different schools to prevent ‘contamination’ of the comparison group by student talk between classrooms in non-classroom settings. Comparison of several key demographics across schools indicated similarity between schools on a number of factors, including number of students, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, ethnic diversity, teachers’ average years of experience, and percentage of teachers with a Master’s degree or higher. Students were also comparable in attendance records and results in statewide assessments. School climate, as evidenced in our observations of curriculum implementation and visits to control classrooms was quite positive across schools.

## Design

This study used a three-factor mixed model design with factors of curriculum, gender, and time. The curriculum factor has three levels, *Steps to Respect* with moderate implementation, *Steps to Respect* with weak implementation, or no curriculum. The gender factor has two levels, female and male. The time factor has two levels, data collection pre-curriculum and two weeks after.

## Measures

There are two levels of the dependent variable for curriculum effectiveness: the *Peer Experiences Questionnaire (PEQ)* and the *Normative Beliefs about Aggression (No-Bags)* were administered pre- and post-curriculum to evaluate experiences and beliefs about physical and social aggression. To assess differences in implementation fidelity between classrooms, professional observers conducted classroom observations of curriculum delivery. We also evaluated changes in the social climate of comparison classrooms in case there were extraneous variables that could have affected any pre-post questionnaire differences for comparison classrooms.

### Peer Experiences Questionnaire

The *PEQ* (Vernberg, Jacobs, and Tremlow 1999) assesses experiences, attitudes, and beliefs regarding physical and social aggression; about school responses to it; and about whether or not intervention from a bystander or adult has an effect. Of the ten constructs detected by the *PEQ*, including, overt aggression, social aggression, overt victimization, social victimization, empathy, aggression is not legitimate, aggression doesn’t pay, stay out, and don’t join in, empathy provided the strongest indication of psychometric strength with Cronbach’s alpha scores between .82 and .87, that indicate a high level of consistency of test responses to questions relating to the same construct. These scores are high across constructs in the test.

### Normative Beliefs about Aggression

The Normative Beliefs about Aggression (No-Bags) survey, developed by Huesmann and Guerra (1997), includes 20 questions in two parts. It assesses beliefs about retaliation and general beliefs about physical and verbal aggression. The first part of the survey includes hypothetical responses to various forms of verbal and physical aggression on a 4-point Likert scale on a range from “really wrong” to “it’s perfectly ok.” Questions include all four variants of girl/boy combinations. In the second part, test-takers use the same scale to evaluate those same forms of verbal and physical aggression “in general” or “if you’re mad.”

Authors report a Cronbach's alpha of .90 and test-retest reliability over one year at .39. The hypothetical format of this measure offers the student respondents a non-threatening, impersonal position, evaluating attitudes and beliefs as opposed to their recent experiences.

#### Implementation Fidelity Check

The *Steps to Respect Implementation Fidelity Check (StR-IFC)* was developed for this study to gauge the extent to which teachers implemented the curriculum as the authors intended it. We composed the checklist from the "Lesson Ratings" form used by curriculum authors in early stages of their *StR* evaluation (Hirschstein 2004), and recommendations from the *Steps to Respect Teacher Training Manual*. The *StR-IFC* includes a focus on classroom climate, a critical component in implementation fidelity (Hirschstein 2004).

#### Interviews

Personal interviews gave participating teachers a chance to debrief after post tests were complete. They added depth of understanding about responses to the curriculum and suggestions for it. Teachers also shared details about the process of *StR* instruction.

### **Procedures**

#### Curriculum Delivery

This study evaluated what really happens in schools, as opposed to an ideal implementation that would not have been accomplished without strict oversight and control. Allowing teachers flexibility to implement the curriculum in the manner and schedule they chose facilitated our ability to recruit and maintain participants. This was consistent with the objective of evaluating implementation fidelity. Teachers in intervention classrooms instructed students with the curriculum during one or two specified periods per week. There were two principal aberrances from the Committee for Children's recommendations.

Training for teachers and all school staff in the *Steps to Respect* curriculum is an integral part of authors' recommendations and research theory. The curriculum contains materials for on-site training of all school staff. Two schools did not conduct official training, however, and two student teachers did not receive the training implemented in one school. Omission of training may not be atypical. In fact, implementation research shows that appropriate training in school-based programs of this nature is often deficient (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredricks, Resnick, and Elias 2003).

The literature component of the curriculum was not taught in half the classrooms, with teachers explaining that they did not have time for it. This occurred despite the fact that the literature component is an integral part of the curriculum, expected to be taught after the *StR* lessons are completed. In the four classrooms in which the literature books were taught, all but one engaged in the books during same time period as the curriculum delivery. This deficiency in curriculum implementation is reflected in fidelity rankings: 'low' and 'moderate' fidelity.

#### Self-report Survey Administration

The *PEQ* and the *No-Bags* were administered by teachers or by staff funded by a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant. Parents gave permission for their students to participate through passive consent, and students had the option of refusing to answer the surveys. Code numbers replaced student names on surveys to protect their anonymity.

A significant change in the directions for the *PEQ* enabled the data to reflect differences from curriculum learning, meet study timelines, and obtain posttest results in a consistent manner. We asked for responses

about experiences “in the last month” as opposed to “in the last three months.” Results therefore indicate immediate effects, as opposed to longer term effects of the curriculum.

### Fidelity of Implementation

The *StR-IFC* enabled expert observers to quantify the extent to which teachers were following curriculum recommendations. Observers conducted observations of curriculum delivery at least once every three weeks in each intervention classroom. This repeated measurement gave information about the consistency of curriculum implementation, classroom climate, and changes in school-wide factors extraneous to the research that might affect the results.

Training for the *StR-IFC* took place before the observers did any field work. First the measure was reviewed individually with observers, explaining the overall goal, the rationale behind the questions, and the criteria for answers. Initial observations were made by the researcher, and then as observers came on board the first one or two observations were conducted together. Fidelity observations took place about every third observation, and each was followed by discussion of answers.

Observations were conducted on forty-eight (48) Main Lessons and eleven (11) Role Play Lessons. Scheduling precluded observation of any role play lessons for one classroom. Averages were calculated for Main Lesson ratings and Summary ratings, including data from both Main Lesson and Role Play lesson observations.

#### Inter-rater reliability

In order to evaluate inter-rater agreement on a yes/no basis for each item, the answers on the Fidelity of Implementation forms were split into two categories. So for questions that were not already in two levels, four answers were collapsed into two. For example, ‘no’ and ‘sometimes’ were considered the same, as were ‘often’ and ‘always.’ Professional observers and the researcher agreed 90 percent in their rating of *Steps to Respect* implementation fidelity.

#### Interviews

Interviews were conducted with all the curriculum teachers after all the post tests were collected. Teachers all seemed to appreciate the chance to share personal perspectives about the curriculum, and interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. Teachers shared multiple insights, anecdotes, and suggestions.

### Analysis

The data were clustered at the prosocial end of the continuum of responses for each of the constructs evaluated by the questionnaires. For each question, between 36 and 72 percent of respondents (average 52 percent) claimed to “never” have experiences as aggressors or victims and asserted that aggression and retaliation are “really wrong.”

Bivariate logistic regression enabled us to capture the variance in the data without having the skewed distribution threaten the validity of findings. Data were recoded, classifying desired outcomes as 1 and the rest as 0. This enabled determination of the odds ratios that groups, genders, and grades improved or maintained their level of prosocial experiences and beliefs.

## Curriculum Effect

Results on the constructs were very similar across the curriculum and comparison classrooms, and logistic regression found no significant odds that being in either group would result in an increase in prosocial beliefs or a decrease in aggression or victimization.

## Gender Differences

Gender differences showed that girls' posttest scores were more likely to indicate increased prosocial beliefs or decreased experience with aggression or victimization. Specifically, they were one and a half times more likely than boys to begin believing that adults disapprove of aggression ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.57, p = 0.05, \text{CI} = 1.0 - 2.49$ ) and almost twice as likely as boys to decrease their overt aggression against others in response to the curriculum ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.84, p = .04, \text{CI} = 1.04 - 3.27$ ).

## Fidelity of Implementation

Positive changes in experiences and beliefs were correlated with fidelity of implementation levels. With both Empathy and Aggression Doesn't Pay, the higher Summary Fidelity level decreased the odds that post test scores would show an improvement, by 2-5 for Aggression Doesn't Pay ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.40, p = 0.02, \text{CI} = 0.19 - 0.84$ ) and almost 2-1 for Empathy ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.46, p = 0.03, \text{CI} = 0.22 - 0.94$ ).

## Grade

Increase in grade level invokes a greater likelihood for a decrease in prosocial belief and increase in experiences of aggression and victimization. Moving up a grade created over 2-1 odds that students would increase their level of social aggression ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.53, p = 0.03, \text{CI} = 0.35 - 0.80$ ) and 3-4 odds that students would experience more overt victimization as the school year progressed ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.73, p = 0.05, \text{CI} = 0.53 - 1.01$ ).

Beliefs, too, became more negative as school level increased. The belief that Aggression is Not Legitimate had a nearly 3-4 chance of decreasing ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.72, p = 0.05, \text{CI} = 0.52 - 1.00$ ) and the belief that Adults Disapprove of Aggression had 3-5 odds to decrease ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.63, p = 0.04, \text{CI} = 0.40 - 0.99$ ). One note of caution is that the confidence interval for Aggression is Not Legitimate does include the possibility of even odds.

## Interviews

### General response to the Steps to Respect curriculum

All the teachers supported the curriculum as a benefit to students in bringing light to the topic of bullying. Since interpersonal conflicts come up regularly in schools, teachers appreciated the opportunity for themselves and students to be versed in a terminology and set of understandings they could use to frame discussions of bullying and other interpersonal conflict when they came up in their classrooms. This made it more likely for even the "quieter kids (to) now speak out and have vocabulary to do something and say, "Stop!" Discussions about power took place in most of these grades 3 - 5 classrooms, including strategies for asserting personal power and taking power away from the bully.

Since exposure to *Steps to Respect*, when students report bullying incidents, they don't interrupt teachers with those reports but make them calmly, "trusting they will be heard." They use empowered, respectful, and to-the-point language. More reporting of bullying came about overall, since now students could identify it. More often those reports were of minor bullying, but about one-third were of "major" incidents. Teachers

understood that increased reporting was not a sign that bullying was increasing, but that now students could identify and discuss it.

One teacher credited *Steps to Respect* for making the year go as well as it did, despite a challenging group of students. “The 3Rs [recognizing, refusing, reporting] went really well. The topic of bystanders caught a lot of interest and increased student understanding of the need to stand up, pay attention, and get involved. Bystander responsibility.”

Even in a class where the teacher felt her students “didn’t apply the skills, (they still) learned the concepts,” discussions about interpersonal problems were conducted more easily and productively. Students were handling minor events on their own but appropriately taking bigger problems to teachers and counselors.

#### Examples of an effect on students

Teachers cited role play activities as especially helpful in giving skills to students who hadn’t had experience speaking up for themselves: after the curriculum they could do so with confidence and eye contact. A group of girls in one classroom who had been experiencing problems with “relational bullying” received Booster Sessions from a school counselor. This resulted in the development of a habit among the girls to solve their conflicts openly and positively, which generalized to the other girls in that classroom. In another class, three girls came to understand that bullying occurs between girls. One student commented, “I do see that as bullying now: I didn’t before.”

One teacher commented, “The most affected students are the ones who now know it’s okay to say what you don’t like in a respectful manner.” Fifth grade students have expressed that they appreciate the skills for their entry to middle school next year.

#### Negative reactions

Sometimes changes were not obvious: in one classroom: “He doesn’t see himself as a bully. His behaviors stem from deeper problems in his life: there is big stuff going on in his life.” Some teachers found it difficult to use the picture cards, holding them while teaching the lesson and getting everyone to be able to see the picture. One teacher suggested the pictures be made available for overhead projectors.

Even with the minimal preparation time necessary for the lessons, four teachers complained that there wasn’t enough time for the lessons, which “cut into social studies and science.” Some teachers suggested that counselors do the teaching. Others cited student complaints about having heard the lessons in former years. One suggestion was that when students have had the curriculum before, teachers be able to choose which lessons are pertinent at specific times. “Overall the program has a lot to offer. It breaks things down in logical order. The videos are helpful. AND, it’s overkill.” Teachers commented that another constraint is when not all the staff is trained in the curriculum, so students get mixed messages from different staff.

#### Positive reactions

Students “liked the exercises that had the class decide if something was or wasn’t bullying. They were good because they gave the kids practice at evaluating that before applying the rules to their own lives. Some kids kept the papers for that in their notebooks for reference.”

“The role play was right on. They were initially embarrassed to do the one about responding to an adult to report inappropriate touching. This use of words was something they resisted, but then they faced it and the anxiety they felt and managed to practice it.” Exercises about how to join a group were extremely helpful.

The teachers appreciated the fact that prep time was minimal for the *Steps to Respect* curriculum. Experienced teachers can let the curriculum flow naturally, but in the classes with student teachers, the master teachers

noticed that the lessons felt scripted and students responded less well. Teachers liked the “flexibility to spend more or less time on a lesson, depending on the needs of the students and the opportunity of the day.”

### Comparison Classroom Update Interviews

The purpose for the Comparison Classroom Update Interviews (CCUI) had been to check for major events that might affect classroom climate, attitudes about bullying, or experiences with bullying in comparison classrooms, thereby affecting questionnaire results. Overall, teachers related no events within the classroom that created any particular upset. A key piece of information came to light from the CCUI, however. Trauma and upset were prominent aspects of the everyday lives of 30 – 50 percent of students. Interviews with curriculum teachers confirmed that this condition was also true for their students. An ongoing disequilibrium and trauma in situations at home includes the interpersonal, financial, legal, and personal lives of their parents.

Classrooms seem to serve as refuges for the students. In all the classrooms with regular, i.e. non-student, teachers there was a palpable sense of community, trust, caring, and nurturing. Teachers expressed a commitment to the role they could play in mitigating the challenges inherent in their students’ everyday lives. This information was especially helpful in appreciating the resilience of the students and the roles of the teachers. It reinforced the fact that effective bullying-prevention and social-emotional learning instruction are absolutely critical supports for elementary students in today’s world.

## Discussion

### Questionnaire Results

Changes in experiences and attitudes about bullying did not show differences across levels of curriculum versus comparison for these elementary students. This phenomenon reflects a number of factors that support the likelihood that the *Steps to Respect* curriculum was indeed, effective. Those factors include the ceiling met at pretest for measurement of experiences and beliefs, test-taking effects that minimized the differences that could be shown, and elementary students’ cognitive ability to discriminate change.

An average of 49 percent of students declared that they never aggressed or were victims of overt or social aggression. This contradicts the estimate that 70 percent of students experience some sort of bullying or victimization (Espelage and Swearer 2004). This 20 percent difference from a current estimate supports the interpretation that the students were answering the questionnaire inaccurately. This could be because they wanted to appear “good,” they were in denial of their experiences with aggression, or they simply didn’t have the capacity to discriminate accurately. Higher rates of targeted behaviors being reported at posttest is a common phenomenon with interventions, due to increased awareness prompted by the intervention of the targeted problem.

As mentioned above, the ceiling effect of ‘never’ and ‘really wrong’ achieved at pretest was a critical problem for the analysis of difference scores. This was coupled with regression toward the mean, a phenomenon whereby test-takers’ results move from pretest extremes. The fact that the mean for these pretests was the ceiling score does not make this process less likely: for the ‘mean’ in this expression refers to the midpoint of possible results. Many students who had scored at the ceiling on pretest declared experience with aggression and victimization at posttest, a process discussed above that relates to increased awareness and understanding about the topic of intervention.

Another phenomenon that makes accurate evaluation of change difficult is the assumption of equal intervals. That is the assumption that a difference between any two levels of response on the questionnaires represents

the same amount of difference. For instance, the difference between “a few times a week” and “about once a week” is probably smaller than that between “about once a week” and “a few times.” The difference between “always” and “most of the time” seems smaller than that between “most of the time” and “sometimes,” but statistical analysis treats those differences as equivalent, thus increasing the chance of a Type II error.

Finally, the cognitive capacity of third through fifth graders to discriminate between possible responses on the questionnaires and to calibrate their experiences over the last month is limited for the group as a whole, especially the younger students. Added to the limited time span of the study and the insidiousness of aggression and bullying as experiences that socialization prompts us to repress and deny, the use of difference scores as a primary determination of curriculum effectiveness may fail to capture the full extent of meaningful difference. Information from teacher interviews takes on weight as a relevant source of information.

### Fidelity of Implementation

There were subtle differences between teachers that could not be captured in the checklist. The fact that implementation by two student teachers did show a difference in levels of fidelity from the others is not surprising. The fact that levels of fidelity did not correspond with levels of difference scores indicates either that the questionnaires did not capture changes produced by the curriculum, that other variables are impacting change scores, or that there are characteristics of implementation the measure fails to capture.

Fidelity summary totals and main lesson totals corresponded with observers’ own ranking of teachers, according to the style of teaching and interaction in the different classrooms. Differences in level of student engagement and participation corresponded with the rankings produced by the checklists.

### Interviews

It is important to remember that we cannot generalize to the whole population from reports given in individual interviews. Nevertheless, the views expressed in the interviews and in the description of them here were consistent across interviews, and we did not fail to report any negative interview responses.

### Limitations

Shared method variance was a limitation in this study that produced a lack of variance in outcome data from having only one type of quantitative measure for change. Also, the fact that we changed the time period referenced in the directions for Peer Experiences Questionnaire completion from “in the last three months” to “in the last month” contributed to small pre- and posttest differences.

In future studies, teacher evaluation of at-risk students’ behavioral and understanding change, with measures such as the Behavioral and Emotional Reference Scale (BERS) or the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) could be helpful. Teachers have been shown to be excellent predictors of problem behavior (Walker, Ramsey and Gresham 2004). Having them evaluate the whole class on these scales might be burdensome and subject to some reliability challenges.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that we were unable to monitor and evaluate the literature component of the curriculum, or work with teachers willing to engage in reflective discussions and writings about the stories with their students.

*Steps to Respect* expects whole schools to be engaged in the *StR* process, including all staff. In our curriculum schools, office staff, cafeteria and gym teachers, counselors, and bus drivers were not trained in *StR*, nor was the school as a whole engaged with the curriculum on an ongoing basis.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers' reports of changes in their students and students' interchanges that demonstrated change provided support for the effectiveness of the curriculum. Teachers advocated strongly for inclusion of the curriculum across their schools, as a forum for enhancing understanding and discussion of this topic that unfortunately continues to be widespread and as a tool for preventing bullying, intervening in it when it does occur, and mitigating the effect on victims.

Teachers' recommendation that school counselors deliver the curriculum to classes is certainly a viable option, one supported by the Committee for Children's *Teacher Guide* to the curriculum. Student engagement with curriculum presentation from counselors would be enhanced if teachers were involved with curriculum delivery, contributing to the consistency of messages across school contexts. Teachers could conduct booster sessions and integrate the concepts into everyday classroom activities and discussions.

Differences between classrooms in the level of challenge presented by students and the contingencies of their lives could not be accounted for in our statistical analysis. One teacher in our study had an exceptionally difficult class, although due to the level of teaching and classroom climate this would not be evident to an outsider. Using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) as a statistical method would take preexisting differences between students into account, though it could not correct for them. The skewed distribution of our difference scores precluded the use of ANCOVA in this study.

Our conclusion from statistical analysis, observations, and interviews is that fidelity of implementation goes hand in hand with a level of overall trust and reciprocal caring in the classroom. Classroom climate was so positive in comparison schools and teachers were so strongly engaged in offsetting the risks facing their students, that comparison classroom students showed test score gains across the year comparable to those of students in curriculum classrooms.

For participating classrooms, when it was coupled with teachers' sincerity and buy-in to the concepts being taught, the curriculum became the critical component for the success of classrooms during the year of the study. *Steps to Respect* prompted particular students to make significant progress in developing interpersonal skill and understanding, and it enabled classrooms to advance together toward healthy relationships with an explicit base of understanding and vocabulary.

Denial by families, schools, and society of the painful side of our relations and experience has served only to inhibit development and understanding from transforming antisocial and destructive processes in our society. Again and again, teachers gave examples of students experiencing a positive shift in peer relations and in school safety with the background from the *Steps to Respect* curriculum. They gained increased understanding of bullying, a language to discuss it, and practice with a set of behaviors to stand up for themselves and seek help when appropriate.

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