

School Wide Positive Behavior Support  
and Bullying in Schools

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## **Introduction**

Bullying in schools is a critical issue facing many youth in Canada, and around the world. Its harmful effects and wide-spread nature make it a topical and relevant concern for both youth and adults alike. School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SW PBS) will be examined as a potential preventive strategy to bullying in schools. Its tenets, advantages and limitations are discussed in relation to bullying in schools. Its effectiveness is examined through specific examples of its application in schools to reduce problem behavior, increase pro-social behavior and prevent bullying behaviors. Finally, bullying is discussed in terms of its relevance to my educational practice.

## **Bullying**

There has been a recent increase in awareness and concern regarding bullying among youth (Pepler and Craig, 2011; Pepler, Craig, O'Connell, Atlas and Charach, 2004). Olweus (2007) described bullying as occurring when an individual is, "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students...intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another" (pp. 265). He also noted a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Craig et al. (2009) carried out a cross-national study including 40 countries on bullying among adolescents. They examined several different types of bullying across 6 of the countries including physical, verbal, social, sexual harassment, racial and religious. These were further sub-divided into general groupings of bullying, which included direct physical bullying (physical), direct verbal bullying (verbal, sexual harassment, racial or religious) and indirect bullying (social). Craig et al. found the prevalence of reported bullying among Canadian boys to be greater than among Canadian girls. In addition, they found the prevalence of reported

bullying among Canadian boys to increase with age (from age 11 to 15) while the prevalence among Canadian girls across age tended to remain stable. Overall, they found that 26% of their 53, 249 participants reported engagement in some form of bullying. According to Olweus (2007), victim characteristics usually include being sensitive, cautious, lonely, insecure and quiet while bullies tend to be impulsive, have a need for dominance and view violence in a positive light.

### **Effects of Bullying**

Bullying may have harmful effects on those involved. Craig (1998) found that youth who reported being victimized were more likely to also be anxious and depressed and that being victimized exacerbated these conditions. According to Rigby (2000), boys and girls who are bullied and who have limited social supports also have poor mental health, though this association is greater among girls. Nylund, Bellmore, Nishina and Graham (2007) found those students who reported being victims of bullying also reported feeling many symptoms of depression and feeling unsafe while attending school. In addition, Card and Hodges (2008) reported that victims of bullying often show poor academic achievement and suggested that this may be due to either the victim focusing their attention on the bully to the exclusion of their school work or that poor academic achievement may be a reason for the bullying. Finally, Olweus (1993) reported the long-term effects of men who were bullied during adolescents as being more depressed and having lower self-esteem than men who were not bullied as adolescents.

### **Traditional Approaches to Bullying**

Skiba, Peterson and Williams (1997) and Simonsen, Sugai and Negrón (2008) noted the use of punitive consequences (e.g., suspension, “zero-tolerance” policies resulting in expulsion, detention) to the exclusion of preventive strategies traditionally used by schools and the limited effects that this approach tends to provide. Anderson and Kincaid (2005) noted that teachers report feeling ill-equipped to effectively handle bullying behaviors and also noted that typical consequence strategies (e.g., suspension, “zero-tolerance” policies resulting in expulsion, detention) employed by schools are ineffective at reducing bullying and increasing social skills and may, in fact, exacerbate this issue. Graham (2010) reported that these types of consequences may actually increase inappropriate behaviors in schools.

### **Bullying Intervention Research**

Vreeman and Carroll (2007) reviewed 26 studies that evaluated the effects of a variety of school-based interventions. They divided the analyzed studies into curriculum approaches, school-wide interventions, social skills groups, mentoring approaches and social work support in order to differentiate between the approaches. They found school-wide approaches to yield the greatest effects in reducing bullying behaviors. They did, however, note some drawbacks with the school-wide approaches analyzed as they appeared to be effective in some schools and not others. Several factors appeared to influence the effectiveness of those programs studied. First, the degree of a school’s participation with the program appeared to affect the outcomes; those schools who were more involved with planning and implementing the school-wide program had greater successes than those schools who were less involved in the process and execution. Second, the difficulty in replicating a program run in one school in another school was noted as a

potential factor in determining effectiveness. Because some of these programs may be altered to fit each school, it may be difficult to accurately compare them across schools as component parts may be adapted to different schools. Third, the authors noted that characteristics of each school may also influence the effectiveness of a school-wide program. For example they suggested class size, level of teacher training and previous pro-social intervention attempts may all affect outcomes for any particular school. Lastly, the focus of school-wide approaches on targeting the entire school environment for change rather than containing programs to specific classrooms appeared to produce superior outcomes. The authors noted that this approach involves all individuals in the school in all areas of the school. It should be noted that SW PBS was included in only 1 study of the 10 school-wide interventions involved in this review and, as noted below, SW PBS provides the flexibility for schools to develop specialized interventions rather than some school-wide approaches being more of a blanket approach for all schools. With the results that Vreeman and Carroll provided, namely school-wide interventions showing the most promise in reducing bullying behaviors, SW PBS, discussed in greater depth below, has the potential to produce even greater results as a school-wide approach due to its flexible nature.

Merrell, Isava, Gueldner and Ross (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 16 studies involving bullying interventions. They found that school based interventions showed only modest results in reducing bullying behavior, however, they did not separate the interventions included in the analysis as Vreeman and Carroll (2007) did and instead grouped all school based interventions together as one. This means that the interventions analyzed as a whole ranged from providing social worker support to a school to short-term approaches, such as an 8 week social skills program, to school-wide approaches. Grouping this diverse set of approaches together as

school based interventions does not provide specific information on the relative effectiveness of each approach.

### **School-Wide Positive Behavior Support**

SW PBS is a broad approach to addressing challenging behavior in schools (Good, McIntosh and Gietz, 2011). Freeman et al. (2006) explained SW PBS as “focusing on (a) investment in the social culture of the whole school as a foundation for both social and academic success, (b) emphasis on prevention of problem behavior, (c) reliance on directly teaching appropriate skills to all students, as well as rearrangement of both antecedents and consequences when necessary, (d) use of a three-tiered continuum of behavior support practices to facilitate prevention of problem behavior, and (e) active collection and use of data for decision making” (p.6). Bradshaw, Mitchell and Leaf (2010) noted the focus of SW PBS as changing the school environment and staff behavior in order to foster a more positive school culture, which will likely change student behavior. This is done through explicitly outlining school-wide behavioral expectations as well as behavioral infractions, creating a system of consistent consequences to both reinforce students when they engage in the behavioral expectations and provide negative consequences for students when they engage in infractions, and implement ongoing training and recommendations for revisions based on data collection (Bradshaw et al., 2010). SW PBS provides supports for all students to be successful with the behavioral expectations by providing more targeted support to those students who do not show improvements with a generalized or universal approach (Good et al., 2011). In addition, behavioral expectations are stated positively in order to specifically convey appropriate behaviors to students and faculty, rather than create vague statements about what is unacceptable behavior (Anderson and Kincaid, 2005). Simonsen et al. (2008) noted SW PBS as a proactive and preventive strategy to target social and academic

success. Finally, Anderson and Kincaid (2005) noted the flexibility of SW PBS to be applied across different schools as it is not a pre-scripted package but rather a framework within which individual schools are able to develop their own expectations and guidelines that best suit the specific needs of each school.

### **School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Research Examples**

There are several examples in the literature of SW PBS's effectiveness. For example, Metzler, Biglan, Rusby and Sprague (2001) found reductions in discipline referrals, increased student perceptions of school safety and decreases in student reports of victimization. The latter finding, however, was also seen in the comparison school so cannot be directly associated with the SW PBS intervention. Metzler et al. reported that the crucial factors "appear to be (a) teaching appropriate social behavior, (b) greatly increasing reinforcement for such behavior, (c) clear communication of a small number of rules, (d) the consistent provision of corrective consequences for rule violation, and (e) ongoing monitoring of student outcomes and social climate to assess and adjust procedures" (p. 475). This approach's comprehensive nature, as opposed to an isolated approach for example on consequences, appears to be a significant element of its effectiveness.

McIntosh, Bennet and Price (2011) also reported lower levels of office referrals among schools in a British Columbia school district who implemented SW PBS. The authors also reported increases in academic achievement and student reports revealed an increase in perceptions of safety, clarity of behavioral expectations and decreases in reports of bullying. They noted that level of implementation fidelity was a key element to the success of SW PBS across all schools evaluated. McIntosh, Horner and Sugai (2009) noted low implementation

fidelity as a key barrier to the sustainability of school-wide interventions. Of particular interest in this study is the finding that schools in low income neighbourhoods tended to show the highest implementation fidelity and, therefore, revealed the best outcomes. McIntosh et al. noted, therefore, that “these results may be particularly salient for educators seeking solutions to close the achievement gap between high and low poverty schools” (p. 57). Finally, the authors noted that schools and districts that employ evidence-based practices and collect accurate data on their progress may help increase implementation fidelity as staff may feel their efforts are likely to succeed due to the previous research conducted on the intervention and viewing their own data’s successes.

Bradshaw et al. (2010) studied the implementation of SW PBS in 21 elementary schools compared to 16 control schools over 5 years and found decreases in office discipline referrals and suspensions. The authors did not, however, find significant differences on standardized test scores for academic achievement between SW PBS schools and comparison schools. They noted that all 21 schools that employed SW PBS showed high implementation fidelity across the 5 year study, which they suspected was likely due to the ongoing training that the researchers provided school staff. This ongoing training, however, would likely not be provided outside of a research setting and so this begs the question of generalized application to schools that wish to implement SW PBS but do not have access to this intensive ongoing support.

Two examples of implementing SW PBS to specifically target bullying prevention follow. Ross and Horner (2009) conducted a study that involved creating and implementing the bully prevention in PBS program that Good et al. (2011) also employed below. They described the program as “blend(ing) schoolwide PBS, explicit instruction of a three-step response to problem behavior, and an emphasis on removing the antecedent and consequence events that control



bullying behaviors” (p. 747). Ross and Horner studied 6 students who engaged in bullying behaviors. They found decreases in bullying behaviors, as well as, increases in appropriate behaviors in response to bullying by victims and bystanders. The authors noted that this intervention focused on removing the attention that victims and bystanders may provide bullies and that it may not be effective in reducing bullying behaviors that are motivated by other sources, for example to fulfill a need for power. Finally, a social validity measure was examined and school staff reported the intervention as both effective and efficient, which McIntosh et al. (2009) noted as important factors in the sustainability of school-wide interventions.

Good et al. (2011) discussed bully prevention through SW PBS by focusing on providing everyone involved (i.e., teachers and students) with appropriate behaviors that they may engage in when they encounter bullying in their school. The authors stated that, “the goal of integrating bully prevention into SW PBS is to target bullying from within a proactive system, as opposed to a responsive one” (p. 51). Good et al. implemented the specific bully prevention in PBS approach discussed above first developed by Ross, Horner and Stiller (2008) into a school that had previously adopted SW PBS. An essential feature of this study was the consultation of students on the program prior to its implementation. This important step allowed the students to provide the researchers and school staff with feedback on the program and take ownership of its tenets by voluntarily forming a student SW PBS leadership team whose members adequately represented the school’s population, including members who had previously engaged in bullying behaviors. Students requested being involved in the process on an ongoing basis which the researchers and school staff supported. Good et al. found a significant reduction in office discipline referrals due to bullying behaviors and suspensions over one school year when compared to the previous year. This study highlighted the importance and effectiveness of

inclusion of students in implementing SW PBS to reduce bullying behaviors. Future research might compare two models of SW PBS and bully prevention, one with student involvement and one without, to clarify this relationship further.

### **Limitations of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support**

There are several limitations to SW PBS that are important for discussion. First, Sugai and Horner (2002) do not recommend introducing a SW PBS intervention without at least 80% staff support for doing so. This has the potential to be extremely difficult for some schools to establish. Second, the need for high levels of implementation fidelity is crucial and can also be difficult to achieve (Pepler et al., 2004), especially if initial support is lacking. Metzler et al. (2001) noted ongoing recognition of staff for appropriate implementation of the intervention and improvements made as a key factor to maintaining fidelity. Third, Sugai and Horner (2002) noted that sufficient resources, such as implementation materials, are required for SW PBS's success. Because great improvements were made in low income neighbourhoods in the study conducted by McIntosh et al. (2011), this recommendation may speak to ideal situations but may not actually be necessary for implementation. Fourth, Sugai and Horner (2002) also noted the importance of ongoing data collection and monitoring. This is an essential part of SW PBS's effectiveness as decisions are made for intervention revisions based on the data. McIntosh et al. (2009) noted ongoing data collection as a key factor to the sustainability of school-wide interventions. Data collection, however, may be perceived as an additional burden to already overworked school staff. This may dissuade some school staff from supporting SW PBS, potentially adding another barrier to achieving 80% support and high implementation fidelity. Finally, involvement of students in creating and designing the guidelines of a school's behavioral expectations appears to be lacking in the research on SW PBS. For example, Anderson and

Kincaid (2005) noted the necessity of a team approach with administration, a behavioral specialist and teachers but failed to mention the inclusion of students in developing the rules and consequences of the intervention. From the studies discussed above, only Good et al. (2011) included students in the process of creating, implementing and maintaining a school's intervention. Rigby (1996) noted that students are often hesitant to get involved when they observe bullying in schools and do not feel a sense of responsibility to intervene. Including the students as stakeholders in SW PBS's intervention plan may provide students with a sense of ownership of the guidelines. In addition, Orpinas and Horne (2010) noted the importance of creating a positive school environment to combat bullying. Having students involved in the planning process may also help with creating a more positive school culture because students may be more likely to feel a sense of cohesion and unity with all of those involved, which may lead to positive connections and relationships.

### **Relation to Educational Practice**

Nabuzoka, Whitney, Smith and Thompson (1993) and Heinrichs (2003) noted many factors that may render special needs students susceptible to bullying, such as deficits in language, mobility and social skills, atypical behaviors, difficulties forming protective friendships and perceptions that these students are engaging in bullying behavior.

Bullying, therefore, influences my practice in many ways. As a behavioral consultant for students with autism much of the programming that I recommend is to teach students the skills they will need to be successful in their school environments. I teach assertiveness skills to students from a young age as many of my clients, especially those who have many skills but have challenges with social situations, do not learn the skills necessary to be socially successful

as many typically developing children do. For example, in a preschool setting a peer may take a toy my student is playing with and they will likely not have the assertiveness skills to say, “Give it back” or “I was playing with that” as typically developing children may. If these skills are not learned from a young age, peers may take advantage of students who do not stand up for themselves in social situations, especially as these interactions become increasingly complex. Social Skills teaching, in general, is a focus of many of my students’ home-based Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) programs in order to better equip these individuals with the skills they need to be successful in school and peer settings. For many students who are highly impaired, they may be the victims of bullying and may not be able to report this to an adult or to learn the social skill needed to appropriately react in these situations, for example, for those students who struggle with acquiring speech.

Many of these students cannot advocate for themselves and so interventions such as SW PBS provide a framework for school staff and students to advocate for them. In my experience, I have found the potential for bullying to be the primary concern of parents who have children with autism. Some parents have considered private school and home schooling in an attempt to shield their child from being bullied. A SW PBS approach may alleviate these fears and reduce the potential for bullying among special needs students as it focuses intervention on each school as a whole. Special needs students can also be included as this approach may be tailored and presented in a variety of formats (e.g., with visual supports) to many differently skilled students and provides the structure and predictability that many students with special needs require for success (Good et al., 2011). SW PBS’ tiered approach allows for more targeted support of special needs students to be successful in participating in the school’s initiative (Good et al., 2011). As Vreeman and Carroll (2007) suggested, an intervention that involves the entire school

may be more effective at reducing bullying behaviors. Including students in the planning and implementation of a bully prevention initiative allows them to take ownership of the program and may lead them to stand up for those students who may not have the skills to protect themselves. When an entire school participates a sense of cohesion may develop, which may lead typically developing students to perceive special needs students more as part of their student body and, therefore, not deserving of victimization just as all other students are not.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the research shows positive and promising support for SW PBS in reducing bullying and related behaviors and increasing a positive school climate. There are several drawbacks to the intervention that are significant for its initial introduction and maintenance, however, with adequate resources, such as materials and time for teachers to spend upholding its integrity, many of these limitations may be alleviated. Because SW PBS is an evidence-based practice, school districts may be more inclined to allocate these resources to its implementation due to the promising outcomes SW PBS has produced in many schools.

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