

HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOLS?

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Over the last ten years there has been a considerable growth in community concern about bullying in schools. Numerous schools in Australia and overseas have developed and implemented anti-bullying programs. There has, however, been relatively little attention paid to evaluating their success.

One approach to examining whether schools have been successful in their efforts to reduce bullying has been to compare recent results from social surveys of students with survey results from several years ago.

It has been claimed that the comparisons show no change in the incidence of reported bullying. This is, however, a seriously flawed approach. There has, without doubt, been a large increase in **awareness** of bullying. Some years ago many more people thought of bullying as exclusively physical in nature. Now it is widely recognised that most bullying is verbal, and a good deal of bullying is indirect, as in deliberately excluding people. People see bullying now where they did not see it earlier.

It is also the case that comparing survey results on bullying is generally futile, as surveys in this area typically ask different questions and provide non-comparable answers.

So to answer the question about whether anti-bullying programs are successful we must examine carefully designed experimental studies in which the incidence of bullying has been reliably measured before and after a program has been implemented. A limited number of such studies have been done. Last year I was asked by the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department to identify and evaluate such studies. (Rigby, 2002).

Copies of the report can be accessed through the web (see reference) You can also phone a free number 1800 703 777 to order a hard copy.

I was able to find a number of studies conducted between 1985 and 2001 which shed some light on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in reducing bullying among children between the ages of 5 and 12 years.

Each of the studies involved measurements of the incidence of children's aggressive or bullying behaviour at school - or kindergarten - **before and after** an intervention.

Mostly, estimates were based upon **self-reports** of students; in some **cases peer-nominations** were used; in others, teachers or researchers made **systematic observations** of children's behaviour.

Some evaluations involved a substantial number of schools, as many as 42; others involved as few as one. In some of the studies, **control schools** were used, a desirable procedure since pre-testing itself can raise awareness of bullying and result in an apparent increase.

The programs themselves could be classified as those that made use of **one particular** kind of procedure and those that involved **multiple** procedures. There were **two** in the first category.

In Sheffield, England in the early 1990s Helen Cowie et al persuaded a number of teachers in to employ so-called 'co-operative teaching methods' in 16 classes in 2 primary schools, having first assessed the incidence of bullying at the schools. A small reduction in reported bullying was subsequently reported, though in general the researchers were disappointed in the outcome.

In Chicago, USA, in the late 1990s McMahon et al introduced into the curriculum for 5 classes of kindergarten children, lessons designed to help them **manage their anger better**, to **act assertively** rather than aggressively and to **behave more empathically**. Subsequent behavioural observations by the researchers indicated a significant reduction in aggressive behaviour, though this was not supported by teacher assessments.

Other programs used multiple procedures. These typically included

- Educational programs aimed in the first place at improving teacher awareness and understanding of the phenomena of bullying.
- The development of school **anti-bullying policies** strongly supported by the school community including students and parents
- The introduction of **relevant curriculum material** so as to raise awareness of bullying among students and promote the acquisition of pro-social values and skills to assist in countering bullying, for example, tolerance for differences, assertiveness to discourage bullies and pro-active behaviour on the part of bystanders.
- Procedures for dealing with actual cases of bullying

There were notable differences in recommended procedures for dealing with bullying. Some programs emphasised the **need for rules and sanctions** to be applied to those who bullied others. Some programs emphasised so-called **problem-solving approaches**, such as mediation, the Method of Shared Concern and the No Blame Approach.

How **successful** were these programs? Of the nine programs using multiple procedures included in my examination, there were eight evaluations that provided clear evidence of a reduction in bullying following the intervention.

The largest was an average of 50% reduction in reported bullying by Dan Olweus in the Bergen area of Norway in the 1980s. However, for the most part the reductions were **modest** in size. For example, in England in the 1990s a large scale study by Peter Smith and others reported an average reduction of 17% among primary school children.

It was also evident that generally reductions tended to occur more often **among young students** than among older students

Secondly the reductions occurred more in the numbers of students **being bullied** than the number of students bullying others.

Finally, reductions were much greater in schools where the programmes had been carried **out most thoroughly**. This was true in each of the 3 studies in which measures were taken of the **extent** to which the programmes had **actually been implemented**. In some highly conscientious schools reductions of up to 80% were reported.

It is hard to be certain about **which kind** of program was more successful because programs contained common elements. But it is worth comparing the effectiveness of programs that emphasised **the use of rules and sanctions** - following the line promoted by Dan Olweus, with those which emphasised an alternative **problem-solving approach** in dealing with cases of bullying.

Interventions using a Rules and Consequences approach			
Norway	Bergen	Olweus	Very positive
	Rogaland	Roland	Negative
Canada	Toronto	Pepler et al	No change
Belgium	Flanders	Stevens et al	Positive
Switzerland	Berne	Alsaker et al	Positive

Interventions using problem solving approaches			
England	Sheffield	Smith et al	Positive
	London & Liverpool	Pitt & Smith	Positive
Spain	Sevill	Ortega & Lera	Positive
Finland	Turku & Helsinki	Salmivalli	Positive
Australia	New South Wales	Petersen & Rigby	Positive

The interventions employing the Olweus model emphasising rules and consequences, had rather mixed outcomes. In Norway quite large reductions in both being bullied and bullying others were reported in the Bergen area.

Further south around Rogaland the same intervention produced negative outcomes. Among boys reporting being bullied by peers actually increased! For both sexes, more children in Rogaland were reported as bullying others.

In Canada the outcomes of an intervention based on the Olweus model failed to produce consistently positive results. In Belgium there was a small but significant reduction in younger children being bullied, compared with the control schools. In Switzerland, there was again evidence of a reduction in kindergarten children being bullied by their peers, especially in physical bullying.

If we turn to programs incorporating **problem-solving approaches**, they appear to have fared rather better, with positive results (reductions in children being bullied) being reported in England, Spain, Finland and Australia, though in none of these places were the reductions on average large.

I should add that since the publication of the Attorney General's report, there is news of a successful intervention in Western Australia, headed by Donna Cross – the so-called Friendly Schools Project - and another in Donegal, Ireland by Mona O'Moore et al. Both of these have concentrated on promoting more positive relations between children rather than on seeking to stop bullying by punitive means.

What are the Implications?

First, I think the results are, on the whole, encouraging. Nearly all the programs showed **some** significant results. In schools where programs had been very thoroughly implemented, the reductions were sometimes quite large.

Secondly, it is important to **begin early**. Young children can be influenced, it seems, to be less involved in bullying, more readily than older children. **Early intervention** is clearly very desirable.

Thirdly, we are evidently more successful in helping **children to protect themselves** from the bullies than in stopping those who bully. Victimised children are more strongly motivated to learn how to change their behaviour than those who bully.

Clearly we need to redouble our efforts in dealing more effectively to discourage the behaviour of those who bully others in schools, if only because these children are more likely than others to become aggressive and violent adults.

Fourthly, **given** that current evidence suggests **that problem-solving methods** may be at least as effective as punitive methods in dealing with perpetrators, greater awareness of **how** and **when** these methods can be used is strongly recommended. (See Rigby, 2001). .

Finally, it is my firm impression - based on a recently completed study of what 40 Australian schools are doing to counter peer victimisation (funded by the Criminology Research Council) - that **a large number of Australian schools** are in fact designing and implementing well considered programs to reduce bullying – programs which contain features that have been shown - in well controlled studies - to enjoy a significant measure of success (Rigby and Thomas, 2002).

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