

Skills learning program in middle schools dramatically reduces fighting

May 7 2013, by Sharita Forrest

(Medical Xpress)—Middle school children who completed a social-emotional skills learning program at school were 42 percent less likely to engage in physical fighting a year later, according to a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

The study, which is ongoing, involves more than 3,600 children at 36 [middle schools](#) across Illinois and Kansas, the largest sample to date used to investigate the impact of a social-emotional skills learning program on the behavior of [middle school students](#).

Dorothy Espelage, an educational psychologist in the College of Education at the University of Illinois and expert on bullying and [youth violence](#), is the principal investigator on the study. The research is supported by a grant from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Sixth-graders in the 18 intervention schools in the study completed the grade-appropriate module of Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention, a program of developmentally sequenced curricula for sixth through eighth graders that is widely used in U.S. schools. Aimed at reducing bullying, substance abuse, [peer pressure](#) and sexual harassment/violence, the curriculum addresses common underlying risk and preventive factors by promoting empathy, communication and [coping skills](#) as well as emotion management and decision-making.

The module for sixth graders comprises 15 lessons, which trained

teachers taught weekly or semiweekly over the course of an academic year.

According to a 2009 study, more than 30 percent of [high school students](#) engage in physical aggression each year.

The 42 percent decrease in physical fighting found by the researchers exceeded a goal set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which has set a goal of a 10 percent reduction in fighting among high school students by 2020.

"The magnitude of this finding should not be minimized," Espelage said. "The treatment effect was substantial. Given that the Second Step program is being implemented at many schools across the U.S., it's encouraging to see a significant reduction in physical aggression after 15 weeks of content."

Before and after the curriculum was implemented, students were surveyed about their experiences with [physical aggression](#), verbal/relational bullying, homophobic name-calling and sexual violence.

Consistent with prior research, the current study found an association between aggressive behavior and schools with high poverty rates, as indicated by the proportion of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. But even when the researchers controlled for the significant, negative influence of poverty, they found the same decrease in physical fighting after students went through the social-emotional skills curriculum.

The study did not find any intervention effects for perpetration or victimization related to bullying, homophobic teasing and sexual violence. The sixth-grade curriculum does not address sexual harassment, although some of the students reported experiences with

sexual violence and homophobic teasing, suggesting a need to address these problems with younger students.

"These data suggest a distinction between overt – that is, disruptive – and covert or subtle forms of peer aggression, such as name-calling and bullying, which may have important implications for determining the temporal unfolding of program effects in schools," Espelage said.

"Perhaps schools are better able to reduce more overt forms of disruptive and aggressive behavior, as opposed to more insidious or complex forms of aggression that require shifts in norms and attitudes across various social ecologies in schools."

The same cohort of students was tracked through the seventh and eighth grades, and findings on those years will be available this summer, Espelage said.

The curricula for the seventh and eighth grades comprise 13 lessons each and cover topics such as [sexual harassment](#), bullying prevention and bystander intervention.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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