

Schools have limited success in reducing bullying, new analysis finds

April 1 2014, by Stuart Wolper

Two UCLA professors who conducted the most thorough analysis to date of studies on school bullying have found that K-12 schools' efforts to curtail bullying are often disappointing.

The study revealed that schools are trying many different approaches to protect students, and while the more comprehensive programs have been the most effective, they require substantial commitment and [school](#) resources to be successful.

"Band-Aid solutions, such as holding one assembly a year that discourages [bullying](#), do not work," said Jaana Juvonen, a UCLA professor of psychology and lead author of the review. "We are trying to figure out the right balance between comprehensive programs that are costly and require a lot of staff training versus programs that require fewer school resources."

The review, published in the journal *Annual Review of Psychology*, also debunks some common misconceptions about bullying. For example, while it was previously assumed that verbal aggression and exclusion were bullying tactics used more commonly by girls than by boys, the analysis revealed that boys use the tactics as much as girls do.

Perhaps less surprisingly, Juvonen said, gay and lesbian students and students who are overweight tend to get bullied significantly more than other students.

"Starting in elementary school, kids with characteristics that make them stand out are much more likely to get bullied," said Juvonen, who consults with several schools on anti-bullying programs. "They are prime targets for bullies because they are more likely to be friendless, and when they have nobody to defend them, the bullying often escalates."

Children with social connections—even just one friend—are at less risk of suffering severe symptoms after being bullied, Juvonen said. That insight indicates that schools could do a better job of preventing bullying by making sure students are not isolated, for example, by not eating lunch alone.

Anti-bullying programs are evaluated based on whether they are reducing the number of bullying incidents on school grounds, but Juvonen said it might be more telling to consider how much schools are helping the students who are most severely and most frequently bullied.

"It is important to distinguish between victims of prolonged bullying and those getting called names once or twice," Juvonen said. "Students who experience continual bullying are at risk for much more severe symptoms." Such students are most likely to blame themselves, feel depressed and feel that nothing can be done to stop the bullying.

Juvonen said school administrators have an especially difficult time addressing online bullying, or cyberbullying, and they tend to disagree about whether the issue should even be their responsibility.

"Students who have been cyberbullied at night often don't come to school the next day, or they come late or are not focused," she said. "There is a very strong association between what happens in cyberspace and what happens on the school grounds. Many of the same students who are bullied in school are also cyberbullied."

Some schools have been successful combatting bullying by training bystanders to respond to bullying. But Juvonen said the training needs to be a school-wide initiative that provides students with strategies against bullying and unites them in the cause.

Juvonen and co-author Sandra Graham, a UCLA professor of education, analyzed more than 140 studies—a mix of long-term and "snapshot" research—that were conducted in the U.S., Australia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Now, Juvonen and Graham are conducting an eight-year study of 6,000 California [students](#) ages 12 to 19. Focusing on schools that vary in ethnic diversity, they are studying friendships and the development of prejudice in addition to bullying. The current research is funded by the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

Previous studies on bullying by Juvonen and her colleagues have found that:

- Bullies are considered the "cool" kids in school.
- Nearly three in four teenagers say they were bullied online at least once during a 12-month period.
- Nearly half of the sixth graders at two Los Angeles–area schools said they were bullied by classmates during a five-day period.

Students who get bullied often have headaches, colds and other illnesses, as well as psychological problems. Juvonen advises parents to talk with their children about bullying before it happens, to pay attention to changes in their children's behavior and to take their concerns about bullying seriously.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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