

Changing people's behavior: From reducing bullying to training scientists

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If you want to change how teenagers view bullying, go to the straight to the source of most school trends: the most connected crowd. According to new intervention research, targeting the most influential students in a school could be a key factor in reducing harassment and bullying.

These results are part of a group of studies that are being presented today at a [social psychology](#) conference in San Diego, CA, on new, sometimes small, ways to make meaningful impacts on people's lives. "This is an exciting time in the field of social psychology," says Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia who wrote *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change*. "Increasingly, researchers are devising theory-based interventions that have dramatic effects in the areas of education, prejudice reduction, adolescent behavior problems, health, and many others."

The idea behind such intervention work is to change the behavior for a particular group of individuals. Reducing student bullying, increasing interest among teens in math and science, and improving perceptions of women in engineering are the focus of today's talks in San Diego.

Reducing student bullying

In the bullying [intervention study](#), Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Hana Shepherd of Princeton University set out at a U.S. public high school to change students' perceptions that harassment of fellow [students](#) is a normal way to gain and maintain status.

"We were interested in the idea that harassment and bullying in schools is a social norm that is not necessarily related to students' personal feelings," says Levy Paluck. Her team used social network analysis to identify the students who might have the most influence in setting [social norms](#). A random subset of these students participated in

public denouncements of harassment and bullying. The researchers then tracked the social network over one year, also collecting data on disciplinary records and teacher assessments.

Levy Paluck and Shepard found that students who were socially tied to the intervention significantly decreased their perception that harassment and bullying is a desirable norm. At the same time, those students' decreased their harassment and bullying behavior as measured through disciplinary records, teacher assessments, and independent behavioral observations.

Increasing teens' interest in math and science

In a different intervention study aimed at changing teen behavior in math and science, researchers did not target the students themselves but rather their parents. The goal was to increase students' interest in taking courses in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). "We focus on the potential role of parents in motivating their teens to take more STEM courses, because we feel that they have been an untapped resource," says Judith Harackiewicz of the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The participants consisted of 188 U.S. high school students and their parents from the longitudinal Wisconsin Study of Families and Work. Harackiewicz and her colleague Janet Hyde found that a relatively simple intervention aimed at parents - two brochures mailed to parents and a website that all highlight the usefulness of STEM courses - led their children to take on average nearly one semester more of science and mathematics in the last two years of high school, compared with the control group. "Our indirect intervention," funded by the National Science Foundation, "changed the way that parents interacted with their teens, leading to a significant and important change in their teens' course-taking behavior," Harackiewicz says.

Improving perceptions of women engineers

"Many of these interventions work by changing the stories people tell themselves about who they are and why they do what they do, in ways that lead to self-sustaining changes in behavior," says Wilson of the University of Virginia. For example, new work being presented by Greg Walton of Stanford University tested the effects of two interventions on female engineering students, one aimed at making them feel like they belong in engineering and another at teaching them to reflect on core values to help them cope with stress.

Both interventions improved the first-year grades of women enrolled in male-dominated engineering majors compared to a control group, eliminating a gender gap. The two interventions worked in different ways, however: Women in the belonging group were able to build better relationships with male engineers, while women in the value-training group made more friends outside of engineering, according to the study funded by the Spencer Foundation. "The two interventions suggest the power of social-psychological approaches to help people cope with settings in which their group is underrepresented and negatively stereotyped," Walton says.

More information: The symposium "Revealing the Power of Social Psychology through Theoretically-Based Intervention Research" takes place on Jan. 26, 2012, at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP). www.spspmeeting.org/

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