

School-based Interventions for Children to Prevent Aggression and Bullying and Promote Positive Social-emotional Skill Development

Statement of Problem

Exposure to peer aggression and bullying is a serious public health concern. Peer aggression is intentional, mean behavior directed at a peer, while peer bullying is a subset of aggressive behavior in which the aggression has occurred repeatedly and within the context of a real or perceived power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Involvement in these behaviors—either as a perpetrator or a victim—is linked to significant developmental challenges, including extensive peer difficulties, reduced academic success and higher drug use. Bullying victims have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, and notably, bystanders who are witnesses to aggression and bullying experience increased reports of anxiety, depression and trauma.

Peer aggression and violence are more common in schools situated in communities that lack educational and social resources, where children are exposed to stressors such as community violence, poverty, limited access to quality education and systemic barriers. This can result in school climates where students feel unsafe and have difficulty learning.

To help children avoid these harmful, long-term outcomes, early prevention and intervention are crucial, particularly through school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) and aggression prevention programs. Research suggests that these programs should be:

- Comprehensive to address multiple forms of aggression and bullying, including physical (e.g., hitting, fighting), verbal (e.g., name calling), and relational (e.g., rumor spreading, social exclusion) behaviors that can occur in person or online (e.g., cyber aggression and bullying)
- Sensitive to the experiences of youth attending schools in urban, under-resourced communities who are at greater risk for exposure to high levels of aggression, bullying and community violence
- Implemented through a model that is feasible (e.g., to promote fidelity) and involves coaching school staff to run the program (e.g., to promote effectiveness, generalizability and sustainability)

Description

Our team has a 15-year history partnering with the School District of Philadelphia to develop, implement, and evaluate child-focused interventions to address aggression and bullying and promote positive peer relationships. Our initial work was done in collaboration with [Dr. Stephen Leff](#) of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's (CHOP) [Center for Violence Prevention](#) (CVP), who began aggression prevention programming at CHOP in the early 2000s using community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods to integrate science with feedback from key school and community stakeholders.

For the past six years, we have co-directed a new line of research through CHOP CVP that has adapted the original programs. Our translational research has shifted the programs from researcher-led to school-led, leveraging and adapting evidence-based coaching models. Other adaptations include reducing the overall number of program sessions, shortening the length of each of session, and restructuring program format and implementation methods to promote feasibility and allow for wider dissemination and sustainability. Overall, our research has moved beyond efficacy trials into effectiveness trials, testing school-led interventions in real-world conditions.

Our [programming for children in grades three through five](#) within the School District of Philadelphia includes:

Friend to Friend (F2F): The primary component of this program is counselor-led small groups focused on social problem-solving strategies for girls who are at greater risk for relationally aggressive behaviors.

Preventing Aggression in Schools Everyday (PRAISE): Counselors and teachers deliver a classroom-based bullying prevention program that teaches problem-solving, perspective taking and how to be a positive bystander.

These programs are unique in that they include a focus on reducing reactive responses to conflict and teach strategies children can use across settings. Given most children are exposed to aggression and bullying as a bystander, we help children consider when and where to use varying active bystander strategies in ways that feel comfortable and safe. Through this research, we have developed responsive school partnership and participant recruitment methods, as well as intervention implementation strategies that balance core features required for fidelity with a flexibility that is responsive to the unique needs of schools.

Next Steps

Our goal is to disseminate these child-focused programs in schools to promote positive social-emotional skill development and prevent and intervene with aggression and bullying. Prior efficacy studies of these programs have shown great potential. An effectiveness trial of the described coaching adaptation of the small group program is currently underway, and funding is pending for an effectiveness trial of the translational adaptation of the classroom-based prevention program. Findings from these trials will guide future research and dissemination efforts.

We're also expanding our child-focused programming beyond grades three through five by developing and pilot testing a new program for first- and second-graders to improve their SEL skills and reduce bullying and aggression. This study will extend the reach and impact of our existing programs and provide necessary preliminary data for a future trial examining the effects of our programming across the full range of elementary school years.

Finally, we are seeking funding to conduct a longitudinal survey study to understand behaviors, predictors, and outcomes related to cyberbullying among high school youth which will inform future prevention and intervention development efforts.

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Related Tools & Publications

- [Bullying Prevention in Schools: Equipping Students & Adults with Evidence-based Tools Blog Post](#)
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Related Projects

[Supporting Adults to Address Aggression and Bullying Among Children Behavioral Health](#)