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Extension's Efforts to Help Kids Be SAFE: Evaluation of a Statewide Bullying Prevention Program

Abstract

The evaluation reported in this article examined the effectiveness of a statewide bullying prevention program, Be SAFE. Be SAFE involves use of a positive youth development approach to influence peer groups rather than individual bullies or victims. Through the use of pre- and postprogram questionnaires, we found increases in youths' knowledge of how to help someone being bullied and how to be an ally. We found that grade level was associated with youths' knowledge gains across the lessons. The findings from the evaluation can be important for those interested in understanding the impacts of Be SAFE or applying bullying prevention efforts in general.

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Introduction

Bullying is commonly defined as repeated acts of aggression, intimidation, or coercion against a victim who is weaker in terms of physical size, psychological or social power, or other notable power differences (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Bullying behaviors include physical aggression, teasing, and mimicking, as well as indirect behaviors such as social isolation, rumor spreading, and gossiping (Sharp & Smith, 1994). In the United States, bullying has been framed as a public health issue that if unaddressed can present serious negative psychological outcomes for all youths, not just victims. Youths who bully experience higher than average levels of anger and depression and have little empathy for others (Endresen & Olweus, 2001; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). Youths who bully also are more likely to struggle with substance abuse problems in adolescence and adulthood (Kim, Catalano, Haggerty, & Abbott, 2011). Youths who are victimized can experience depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, and suicide ideation, and these issues may persist into adulthood (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003). In addition, research has indicated that youths who witness bullying have negative psychological and physiological distress, similar to victims (Janson, Carney, Hazier, & Oh, 2009; Janson & Hazier, 2004). Witnesses also become desensitized to negative school behaviors and begin to lack empathy for those who are being targeted (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010). Because research has demonstrated that bullying has a negative effect on all youths, it is an important area for Extension prevention and intervention efforts.

Purpose

Identifying ways to reduce children's exposure to bullying behaviors is important to the health and well-being of all youths. Research by Go and Murdock (2003) suggested that programs should focus on increasing all youths' sense of safety, not just those who are victims. In an effort to reduce bullying and increase prosocial behaviors among youths, Extension family and child development and 4-H youth development personnel formed a collaborative relationship to implement a program called Be SAFE. Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming, and Fair Environments (Olsen & Pace, 2013) is a curriculum that teaches youths about physical and verbal bullying, indirect bullying (spreading rumors, etc.), and cyberbullying. The full curriculum has 10 lessons, largely focuses on promoting prosocial behaviors, and offers ways to help youths become allies when they observe bullying (Olsen & Pace, 2013). Additionally, a condensed version of the Be SAFE curriculum, reduced from 10 lessons to six, was developed in response to the limited amount of time teachers are able to allot to educators attending their classrooms (for a review of how the program was condensed, see Duke, Sollie, & Silvia, 2016).

The condensed version of the program was implemented in classrooms in Alabama; Table 1 shows the lessons and activities of the reduced Be SAFE curriculum. We conducted an evaluation of this condensed version of Be SAFE.

Table 1.
Description of Reduced Be SAFE Curriculum

Session(s)	Lesson title and activity or activities	Lesson description
1	Creating a SAFE Space Creating Guidelines for Our Group	During Session 1, educators introduce youths to Be SAFE and discuss the purpose of the program. Youths have the opportunity to discuss and understand the importance of creating a safe, affirming, and fair environment.
2	Exploring Bullying What Makes Bullying Real for You? Taking Action to Stop Cyberbullying	In Session 2, educators help youths identify different types of bullying behaviors, including those related to cyberbullying. In this session youths discuss how different types of bullying affect their peers.
3–4	Understanding Differences Who Am I? Take a Stand	In Sessions 3 and 4, youths discuss why individuals target others regarding race, ability level, appearance, and other differences, and they think critically about their own understanding and acceptance of diversity. Youths also discuss the difference between bullying and illegal forms harassment.

5	Building Emotional Intelligence Clear Mind–Mud Mind	In Session 5, educators help youths develop emotional intelligence by discussing how one's state of mind affects his or her thinking and perceptions. Youths discuss how feelings, actions, and thoughts relate to personal responsibility.
6	Developing Our Social Intelligence Relationship Continuum	In Session 6, youths develop social intelligence by identifying qualities of healthful and unhealthful relationships.
7	Moving from Bystander to Ally Speaking Up and Standing With	During Session 7, educators explain the difference between being a silent bystander and a supportive ally. Youths discuss reasons people do not attempt to interrupt bullying behaviors and identify strategies for moving from being a bystander to being an ally.

Methods

Participants

Parental consent forms and pre- and postprogram questionnaires were collected for 501 youths across 12 schools in Alabama. Between fall 2014 and fall 2015, Extension educators collected data by administering a questionnaire before teaching the first lesson of the program and after teaching the final lesson. The sample was equally male (49.5%) and female (50.5%). Data were collected from youths in grades 5–11: 10.8% (54) were in grade 5, 52.5% (262) were in grade 6, 18.6% (93) were in grade 7, 13.4% (67) were in grade 8, 1.6% (8) were in grade 9, 2.6% (13) were in grade 10, and 0.4% (2) were in grade 11. Participating youths ranged from 10 to 17 years old: 10.8% were 10, 18.0% were 11, 45.3% were 12 ($M = 12.04$, $SD = 1.29$), 16.2% were 13, 4.4% were 14, 2.2% were 15, 3.0% were 16, and 0.2% were 17. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was 54.5% Caucasian, 28.9% African American, 2.0% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 11.3% Hispanic, and 5.6% multiracial.

Measure

The original survey instrument that accompanied the Be SAFE curriculum was a retrospective questionnaire. During a pilot test of the original survey, youths found it difficult to remember their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs before the program (see Duke et al., 2016); therefore, we changed the survey instrument to a pretest/posttest questionnaire. We also adapted the original survey instrument to include items related to demographic information and victimization rates, and we removed questions related to lessons that were not taught. The adapted questionnaire consisted of five demographic items, 22 items related to program outcomes, and two victimization items. The questionnaire as administered before and after the program was

found to be moderately reliable (0.67 and 0.77, respectively) and correlated ($r = .53, p < .001$).

For the purpose of our study, we were interested in measuring specific knowledge gains of youths related to the following key learning components of the curriculum lessons: "Bullying is different from harassment," "I can describe qualities of a healthy relationship," "I know ways to help someone who's being bullied," and "When I feel stressed or worried, I know ways to shift my focus and trust that I will settle down." Youths responded to these items using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Additionally, we selected two items for measuring whether bullying victimization changed for youths who participated in Be SAFE: "During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property" and "During the past 12 months, have you ever been electronically bullied" were measured as yes or no dichotomous variables. We used SPSS version 22.0 to analyze the survey data. Paired-samples *t*-tests were applied to the relevant items on the questionnaire. We used means and standard deviations to summarize pre- and postprogram measurements. We also conducted an analysis to examine mean differences in pre- and postprogram questionnaire responses for each grade level. We created a variable to measure individual changes in pre- and postprogram questionnaire results for each youth and conducted a frequency analysis to count the individual instances of positive change, negative change, and lack of change in responses from youths.

Results

Youths significantly increased in their knowledge of how to help someone being bullied, $t(434) = -5.15, p < .001$; knowledge of how to settle down when worried or stressed, $t(430) = -3.35, p = .001$; and ability to describe qualities of a healthful relationship, $t(425) = -3.28, p = .001$. There were no significant changes in youths' understanding of the difference between bullying and harassment, $t(426) = -1.67, p = .095$, or in reports of in-person bullying victimization, $t(439) = -0.69, p = .492$. Reports of cyberbullying victimization from before to after the program indicated a statistically significant increase, $t(421) = 2.52, p = .012$. Results of the paired-samples *t*-test are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics and *t*-Test Results for Key Items on Questionnaire

Item	No. of responses	Pretest		Posttest		95% CI for mean difference	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Bullying is different from harassment.	427	2.17	0.88	2.26	0.92	-0.20, 0.02	.21***	-1.67	426
I can describe qualities of a healthy relationship.	426	3.08	0.70	3.20	0.69	-0.21, -0.05	.32***	-3.28**	425
I know ways to help someone who's being bullied.	435	3.25	0.72	3.44	0.60	-0.27, -0.12	.31***	-5.15***	434
When I feel stressed or worried, I know ways to shift my focus and trust	431	3.06	0.80	3.20	0.75	-0.23, -0.6	.34***	-3.35***	430

so that I will settle down.

During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?	440	1.66	0.48	1.65	0.48	-.03, 0.05	.62***	0.69	439
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During the past 12 months, have you ever been electronically bullied?	422	1.85	0.36	1.8	0.40	0.01, 0.08	.48***	2.52*	421
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p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

We also examined significant effects by grade level. Findings were significant only among middle school youths (grades 6–8). Results showed that significant increases in knowledge of how to be an ally were experienced by 31.8% of sixth graders, $t(219) = -4.0, p < .001$; 23.9% seventh graders, $t(87) = -2.18, p = .032$; and 32.8% of eighth graders, $t(63) = -3.05, p = .003$. Additionally, 36.1% of seventh graders significantly increased in their understanding of the difference between bullying and harrassment, $t(85) = -2.84, p = .006$. However, sixth and eighth graders had no significant change in understanding the difference between bullying and harassment. With regard to ability to describe qualities of a healthful relationship, significant increases occurred for 28.5% of sixth graders, $t(216) = -2.70, p = .007$, and 30.6% of eighth graders, $t(61) = -2.25, p = .028$. There was no significant difference in the ability to describe healthful relationship qualities among seventh-grade youths. With regard to knowing how to control their emotions, significant increases were experienced by 27.1% of sixth graders, $t(216) = -3.07, p = .002$, and 24.7% of seventh graders, $t(87) = -2.31, p = .023$. Eighth graders, on the other hand, showed no significant difference in knowing how to control their emotions after participating in Be SAFE.

Discussion

Overall, we found statistically significant increases in youths' knowledge of how to help someone being bullied and how to be an ally. As we examined grade level differences, we found associations between grade level and effectiveness of certain components in the reduced Be SAFE curriculum. For example, sixth graders and seventh graders increased their knowledge of controlling their emotions, but there was no statistically significant increase for eighth graders. The data also showed that only sixth-grade and eighth-grade youths experienced statistically significant increases in their ability to recognize healthful relationships; this was not the case for students in the seventh grade. Our findings suggest that overall youths in the sixth grade were the most receptive to information taught from the curriculum. Educators should be conscientious of how they teach concepts from the curriculum as they interact with different age groups.

Limitations

There are three notable limitations in our evaluation study. First, single-item measures were used for understanding knowledge gains. Future studies will involve the use of validated measures supplemental to the measures from the curriculum. Second, we did not find statistically significant reductions in existing bullying victimization rates. Lack of reductions in these rates can be related to the timing of the posttest, which was

administered the day of the last lesson. Because youths did not have a substantial time frame for applying the skills they learned, statistically significant changes were not demonstrated. In future studies, the postprogram questionnaire should be administered at a later time. Furthermore, although those who are perpetrators of bullying could be in the same age group as the program participants, they may not be participants in the program. Until school climates are improved, reductions in victimization may be slow to occur. Third, cyberbullying rates increased from before to after the program. In the reduced curriculum, discussion of cyberbullying is combined with discussion of other types of bullying; there is not a separate day to focus on this area. The finding of increases in cyberbullying suggests that it is important to explicitly focus on cyberbullying to reduce incidence of this activity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goal of Be SAFE is to help youths understand bullying behaviors and gain social and emotional intelligence as a peer group rather than as individual bullies or victims. The results of our study confirm that the condensed Be SAFE curriculum is most effective with youths in grades 6–8 (aged 11–14). Because research has shown that most bullying behaviors peak near the age of puberty (Carney & Merrell, 2001), it is important that Extension educators who engage in antibullying efforts do so with students who are at this stage of development. Through our study, we found that Be SAFE is an effective program for shifting attitudes and beliefs—unfortunately, however, not behaviors.

Extension personnel interested in bullying prevention could begin working with younger age groups. Primary prevention efforts could be considered a precursor to later prevention efforts, establishing healthful peer relationships before bullying behaviors peak. We did not implement Be SAFE with children younger than 10; therefore, it is unknown whether Be SAFE is effective for elementary school children. It may be beneficial to make age-specific modifications to Be SAFE, implement the modified program with younger children, and then evaluate its effectiveness.

A major limitation to our evaluation study was the strength of the curriculum's survey for evaluating the impact of the lessons and activities. It is important for program leaders and those developing curricula to examine their surveys and make adjustments to ensure that validated constructs are used, instead of only single-item measures. As evaluation in Extension programs becomes increasingly important, making adjustments in this area will ensure that Extension program leaders can produce stronger evaluation results.

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