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The effects of a Social Emotional Learning Program on bullying and parents' perspectives

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Abstract

Bullying in schools is a problem that has received widespread attention. Previous evaluations of school-based bullying prevention programs reported mixed results (Farr Gravesteyjn, C, Diekstra, R & Petterson D Inghton & Ttoh, 2009). This study examines the effects of a school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program on bullying and the factors that may help parents to deal with the bullying situation. Results indicate that a program that enhances social and emotional skills has a positive influence on bullying. Data collected by interviews highlight the kind of support that parents require from teachers geared at enhancing their skills in dealing with bullying.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that is reported to be pervasive in many countries around the world (Harel-Fisch et al., 2010). A person is bullied when they are exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on

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the part of one or more other persons, and they have difficulty defending themselves (Olweus, 1999). In the Netherlands, 2% of the children in the age of 12-15 has been often bullied and 16 % of the children sometimes (CBS, 2012). Bullying can take many forms, such as verbal, physical and cyber-bullying and may have lasting effects that persist into adulthood (Olweus, 1993). Victims, bullies, and bully-victims often report adverse psychological effects and poor school adjustment as a result of their involvement in bullying, which might also lead to subsequent victimization or perpetration (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003). Given the high prevalence and strong relationship of bullying to adverse mental health outcomes, evidence-based school prevention programs are of great importance to school psychologists and other mental health professionals working with school-based youth.

2. Problem Statement

Previous evaluations of school-based bullying prevention interventions reported mixed results (Merrell et al., 2008; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Merrell et al. (2008) found that the intervention studies produced meaningful and clinically important positive effects for about one-third of the variables. The majority of outcomes evidenced no meaningful change or negative results. One explanation for divergent and negative findings is that the programs to date have predominantly focused on bullying. Findings revealed that explicit attention to problem behavior can have adverse effects (Merrell et al., 2008). Furthermore, meta-analyses and meta-analytical reviews have indicated that programs that teach general social and emotional learning programs (SEL) enhance not only general psychological well-being, such as the promotion of self-esteem and social and emotional skills, but also problem behaviors (Duralk et al., 2011). An example is a study of a Dutch SEL program, “Skills4Life Program for Adolescents” (Gravesteyn, Diekstra, Sklad & Winter, de, 2010). This study showed a significant effect of the program on suicidality and the effect of the program on suicidality was mediated by self-esteem. Farrington & Ttofi (2009) also recommend that more efforts should be made to implement effective programs based on social and emotional skills, since in their systematic review, a whole-school anti-bullying policy was significantly related to effect sizes for bullying but not for victimization (being bullied). It would therefore be interesting to study the effects of general SEL programs on bullying. However, a bullying situation affects not only the child but also the parents (Mishna, Wiener & Pepler, 2008) and parent involvement in turn affects the bullying situation of the child (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Notably, a systematic review of Farrington & Ttofi (2009) suggested that parent involvement was significantly related to a decrease in both bullying and victimization. These findings suggest that parents should be sensitized about the issue of school bullying. Although there is a considerable body of research on bullying, there is a lack of research on the perception and understanding of parents of children who are bullied. Most research focuses on children involved and on perspectives of teachers (Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler & Wiener, 2011). According to Sawyer et al. (2011) positive parental behaviors protect adolescents from involvement in bullying others and in experiencing bullying victimization. The question remains how parents conceptualize and perceive bullying and how they want to be supported. Parents' understanding of bullying may affect whether they respond effectively to their child who has disclosed victimization and whether they are attuned to signs indicated their child might be experiencing bullying. A study of Connors-Burrow et al. (2009) indicated that when parental support was low, support from teachers was associated with fewer symptoms of depression. However, when parental support was high, the impact of support from the teacher was not significant. These findings underscore the importance of teachers and parents in supporting the children with respect to bullying. This study adds to research in the field of bullying.

3. Research Questions

We focused on two specific questions. First, we examined the effect of a school-based Dutch SEL program for all adolescents on bullying. Second, we focus on how parents perceive bullying and on the factors that may help parents to deal with the bullying situation.

4. Purpose of the Study

This study examined the effects of the Skills4Life program on bullying and explored which factors according to parents help them to manage with bullying situations.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study 1

In this study, 1342 students participated. They represented various types of secondary education². The participants ranged in age from 13 to 16 years and came from 36 schools. The majority (64%) lived in rural or small urban areas (<100.000 inhabitants). The evaluation design was a randomized controlled trial with two conditions: an intervention (the experimental group) and no intervention group (the control group). In total 68% of the students in the control group were in lower vocational school (VMBO). 51% in the control group were boys. In the experimental group 52% of the students were in preparatory secondary vocational education. Of the total experimental group, 53% consisted of boys.

Procedure and analysis

A randomized controlled trial was used to study the effects of the SEL program. The 36 schools were assigned to the experimental or control condition. Every school participated with one or more classes. Data were collected during two consecutive school years. An experimental and control group were compared as to measures taken at the start of the first year (T0), a (short-term) follow-up measurement at the end of the first year (T1), and a (long-term) follow-up measurement at the end of the second year (T2). An additional measurement took place at the beginning of the second year, however, because of the low response this was omitted from the analysis. Students from the first 3 grades (age 13-16 years) participated by completing questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed in classrooms under examination-like conditions.

² In the Netherlands, after attending elementary education, children that are 11 or 12 years old attend secondary school. Secondary school lasts four, five or six years (depending on the type). Preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) lasts 4 years and higher general secondary education (HAVO) lasts 5 years and preparatory scientific education (VWO) lasts 6 years.

Multi-level regression analysis was used to calculate effects of the Dutch SEL program on bullying. Baseline levels of the outcome measure and age, gender, educational level and urbanization grade were included as covariates in the regression model. P-values were derived from a two-tailed t-distribution. Significance levels for an effect were $p < 0.05$ and for a trend $p < 0.10$.

The Dutch SEL program

The SEL program (Gravesteyn, Diekstra, De Wilde, & Koren, 2004; Gravesteyn, Diekstra, Sklad & Winter, de, 2011) was developed by the Rotterdam Municipal Health Center between 2003 and 2010. The purpose of this program was to stimulate a positive development and prevent problem behaviors among 13 to 17 year old adolescents. Specifically, the program aimed at enhancing social and emotional skills in conflict situations and promoting positive thinking. The program consists of 25 weekly classes and uses a sequence of general and problem-specific skill training. The first four lessons of the SEL program were to involve raising students' awareness both of their thinking process, feelings and behavior, and also, of the options for alternative thoughts and for correcting faulty, irrational reasoning. It addresses general skills such as interpersonal problem solving skills, emotion regulation skills and critical thinking. The rest of the sessions focuses on skills for specific situations, such as giving and seeking help, dealing with bullying and setting and respecting boundaries. Each session ends with a 'behavioral commitment for the week'. A combination of methods was used, including information transfer, instruction, discussion, modeling, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, roleplays, videopresentations, social reinforcement and extended practice (Bandura, 1997). The program was delivered by teachers who received a three-day training course followed by two booster sessions over a period of three months.

Measurement

To obtain students' self-reports of bullying, three questions were administered to the students. They answered the following questions about bullying: "how often have you been bullied at school in the last 3 month?", "how often have you been bullied by sms or the internet in the last 3 month?" and "how often have you bullied others in the last 3 month?" The Cronbachs alpha in this study was 0.77.

5.2. Study 2

The second study used basic qualitative methods (Merriam, 2002) to examine the views of parents of children who experience bullying according to their parents. Parents were recruited by publishing advertisements in Dutch journals and websites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 parents with respect to 14 children. The sample consisted of 10 mothers, 1 father and 2 mother-father couples. One of the cases involved both children. There were 5 mothers whose daughters reported being bullied, 5 mothers whose sons reported being bullied, 1 father whose son reported being bullied and 1 mother-father couple whose daughter reported being bullied and 1 mother-father couple whose two daughters were being bullied. Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and mostly conducted in private at the parents' homes. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Before the final interviews were conducted, a pilot study with two parents was carried out to test the limitations, shortcomings and reliability of the interview. During the final interviews, parents were asked to define bullying and how they experienced (feeling and thoughts of the parents) the bullying of their child(ren). Additional questions comprised: the experience of the

parents themselves with bullying, parents' perception of school and community support and their need for support. Moreover, they were asked to nominate possible interventions which they thought might stop bullying. Interviews were analysed to create categories. Constant comparison led to grouping of similar concepts about parents' perception (Baarda & de Goede, 2006). Reliability and authenticity of the data were further ensured through audio-taping and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews.

6. Findings

6.1. Study 1

The results showed a statistically significant improvement in bullying. Students in the experimental group reported less frequent bullying compared to the control group on the short term (T0 vs T1: OR=0.30, B.I.0.10-0.92). On the long term, there were no significant results. However, on the longer term, significant less students in the experimental group indicated that they bullied other children compared to the control group (T0 vs. T2: OR=0.03, B.I. 0.01-0.16).

6.2. Study 2

Defining bullying

Parents were asked to define bullying. Most defined bullying as follows: Someone is bullied when another person or a group uses systematic physical or verbal aggression and when children exclude certain children from joining the group or activities or when they ignore children. One parent stated: "exclusion is the most painful form of bullying." Overall, most parents referred to a power imbalance inherent in bullying situations. They stated that one person wants to exert his power toward another group member for intimidation. Group pressure plays an important role according to parents: "Children bully since they want to belong to a group or are afraid to be bullied themselves." One parent compared bullying with a war: 'I think bullying is war, since it is the worst thing that can happen to you'. Additionally, parents pointed out that children are bullied since they are uncertain, experience fear and suffer from a low sense of self-esteem. According to three parents, it is important how children experience other children's behavior: "When the child experiences behavior as bullying, it *is* bullying." Although, the majority of parents depicted bullying as problematic, three parents describe bullying as a natural process: 'It is just something kids do', 'A society has leaders and followers, there is nothing wrong about it' and 'You find it in every culture, country and group.'

Parental support

Parents of bullied children were asked what kind of support they use and acquire. Over half of the parents indicated the importance of telling a teacher or consulting a social worker. These parents perceived bullying as a shared responsibility of teachers and parents. According to more than a half of the parents the bullying decreased when the school offered assistance to the child and the parents. For example, one of the parents went to school every day to play with her child. Another parent participated in the lessons to stimulate a positive group process. In the interviews, four parents reported that they were not taken seriously by teachers. Indeed, parents felt that teachers consider them insistent and troublesome. Most of the parents are critical of the school of their children; 'they ignore

that there is a power difference between a child that bullies and a child that is bullied'. Nearly all parents affirmed the importance of talking with other parents of bullied children and the children that bully, sharing experiences and stories and helping each other. At the same time, parents of bullied children stressed that they felt insecure about this, since they do not know the point of view of the parents regarding their own children who bully others. The way parents advised their children to respond to the bully varied. Many parents stated that they tried to give assurances to their child as a way to improve their self-esteem, with positive statements or encouraging them to play with other children outside the school. Some parents addressed the bullies or suggested retaliation, but noticed that these interventions were not effective. Finally, parents expressed a strong desire to learn ways to help their children share their experiences and teach them skills and strategies to handle the bully situation. Most parents experienced a mixture of emotions such as anger, concern and insecurity. They are unsure about how to advise their child to respond to bully. After their advises most parents wonder if they gave the proper advise or if they failed. Parents stated that they would liked to have taken action earlier. These parents also described that they do not have the parental skills to support their bullied child.

Parenthood

Most parents described parenthood with a bullied child as stressful and difficult and they worry and sleep badly. Parents indicated that they are happy when their child is. Many of the parents want to control the situation, but realize that they sometimes have to accept it and "learn to let go". A few parents emphasized that a bullying child can also bring the family together, since they communicate and try to solve the problem together. Additionally, according to parents adequate parenthood means teaching skills and life lessons to their children, such as enhancing emotional skills and stimulating independency, i.e handling difficult situations and problems. Approximately one third of the parents feel secure when they cooperate with teachers and schools. Parents also stated that listening, asking questions, problemsolving skills and persisting are important parental skills. Finally, they found it important that they understood the problem and acknowledge that the child is being bullied.

Parents and school

Parents indicated that they felt a strong need to cooperation with the school of their children. This cooperation consists of identifying the bullying problem, reporting it to parents, acknowledging the problem, solving it together with the parents and offering a 'roadmap'. A few parents proposed a measurement instrument, since teachers can score the frequency of bullying in the classroom and the type of intervention school should implement.

7. Conclusions

This study examined the effects of a Dutch SEL program on bullying and explored which factors according to parents help them to manage with bullying situations. The results indicated a decrease of bullying instances. On the short-term less students indicated that they have been bullied and on the long-term less students indicated that they bullied others. An explanation for the effects of the program on bullying is that it teaches adolescents that they can have positively influence on their thoughts, feelings, and behavior and teaches them to practice new and positive ways of handling conflicts and stress. These changes can have a beneficial impact on bullying. A meta-analysis of Durlak et al. (2008) confirmed that primary prevention programs that enhance social and emotional skills result in an increase of coping skills and a decrease in problem behaviors. Furthermore, this study explored

parents' perception of bullying and the support they received. Although most respondents could define bullying, a few believed that bullying is common. Three parents describe bullying as a natural process: 'It is just something kids do', 'A society has leaders and followers, there is nothing wrong about it' and 'You find it in every culture, country and group.' The way parents see bullying and classify it is important because it can affect their subsequent actions and their reactions to the children (Sawyer et al., 2011). If a child perceives an incident as bullying and the adult sees it as "It is something kids just do", the child may be further injured by the lack of support. This may result in caution by the child in disclosing future bullying incidence (Mishna, 2004). Diversity was apparent in the ways parents wanted to be supported in helping their bullied children. Approximately all parents indicated that they wanted to cooperate with teachers and treat bullying as a shared responsibility. They also stated that a partnership between parents and teachers in helping the bullying child decreases bullying. This finding is supported by the study of Connors-Burrow et al (2009). This study suggests that children involved in bullying experience more symptoms of depression than children who are not involved. Notably, support from both parents and teachers can help buffer these children from experiencing symptoms of depression. An explanation for the outcome that parents ascribe that the social support teachers gave them can affect their child positively, is that parental-efficacy increased. This is illustrated by parents in this study who indicated that a lack in support of teachers caused feelings of helplessness, while cooperation between parents and teachers gave parents the feeling that they have more control over the situation. This parental-efficacy refers to parents' perceptions of how capable they are to handle offsprings' problem behavior (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). Bandura (1997) suggested that the beliefs individuals hold regarding their ability to carry out actions necessary to achieve their goals influence their sense of psychological well-being. Parents' self-perceptions of their ability to parent young people effectively may minimize parents' worry and distress that, if experienced, could disrupt the support they give their children. Research on parental-efficacy shows that efficacy tends to decline over time for families with "problem" children, whereas it tends to increase over time for parents of "non-problem" children (Mash & Johnston, 1983). Parents with bullied children may question their ability to respond appropriately and support their children's behavioral change. Another explanation for the outcome that parents ascribe that the social support teachers gave them can affect their child positively is that information given by the teachers caused a better understanding of their child's experience of victimization. This, in turn, can influence the guidance they gave their child. Indeed, parents play an important role in helping their children understand what they should do if they experience being bullied (Craig, Henderson & Murphy, 2000). The strategies parents reported suggesting to their children when bullied varied. Addressing the child who bullies or retaliation were, according to the parents ineffective strategies. Likewise, other research indicated that children who react to victimization by seeking revenge tend to endure increased victimization, as the child who bullies may gain fuel to amplify their bullying (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Sawyer et al, 2011). Another strategies parents suggested were to increase the self-esteem of children, learn children how to open up to them and teach children problem-solving skills. Some parents feel insecure about their own skills to help their children. It is important that parents are aware of effective skills and strategies, since problem-solving skills and conflict resolution are associated with fewer numbers of bullying episodes (Craig, Pepler & Blais, 2007; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004).

This study has important intervention applications, suggesting that parents, not just teachers, may serve as important targets for interventions designed to reduce the negative effects of involvement in bullying. This suggests that besides school-based preventive SEL programs, it is also important to offer a program for parents. This perspective is partly consistent with the philosophy of other prevention programs aimed at decreasing bullying behaviors, where teachers work with parents to provide support (e.g. Olweus, Limber & Mihalic, 1999).

However, a program for parents is particularly important in that parents are actually trained in general parental skills, encompassing both strengthening themselves as well as supporting their children. This is also important because bullying does not occur in a vacuum, or rather, there are contextual factors that must be considered when trying to understand bullying (Demaray & Malecki, 2011). Since parents are highly influential in their child's lives and are important in protecting their children, it is crucial that interventions include them. Not only social support from schools, but also from parents at home appears to be a very important contextual factor (Conners-Burrow et al., 2009).

However, some limitations have to be noted. First, the program has no long-term effect on the students that have been bullied. An explanation could be that the program does not address enough bullying specific aspect or that the program is too short to influence students on the longer term. Second, while important information was provided regarding parents' perception of bullying and the support they receive and require, this study relies on a limited interviews of parents. Although this makes it difficult to generalize, these findings are comparable with findings from other international studies (Conner-Burrow et al., 2009; Sawyer et al., 2011). A third limitation is that support from schools and parents is associated with a decrease in bullying. To assume a causal relationship would be inappropriate.

This study has implications for teachers and schools. Many parents expressed a desire to increase their knowledge and understanding about bullying in order to assist their child. Teachers can play an integral role in helping parents better understand their child's experience of victimization. It is important that parents learn and partake in effective strategies and skills that promote disclosure and support of their children. Likewise, parents need to understand that responses that are not supportive of helpful may cause damage and they have to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to prepare their children to respond adequately on bullying.

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