The effects of a Skills4Life program on bullying and parents' perspective

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http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/book.11

Abstract

Bullying in schools is a problem that has received widespread attention. Previous evaluations of school-based bullying prevention programs reported mixed results (Farrington & Ttoh, 2009). This study examines the effects of a school-based Dutch Skills4Life 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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Keywords: Bullying; schools; Skills4Life; parents
1. Introduction
Bullying in schools is a problem that has received widespread attention in recent years. Given the high prevalence and strong relationship of bullying adverse mental health outcomes, evidence-based school prevention programs are of great importance. Evaluations of school-based bullying prevention interventions report mixed results (Farrington & Ttoh, 2009). One explanation for divergent and negative findings is that the programs to date have predominantly focused on bullying. Meta-analyses have indicated that universal programs that teach social and emotional learning programs (SEL) enhance not only psychological well-being, such as the promotion of self-esteem, but also diminish problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). This study evaluates the effects of a Dutch SEL program for adolescents, named Skills4Life on bullying. However, a bullying situation affects not only the child but also the parents and parent involvement in turn affects the bullying situation of the child. Notably, parent involvement is significantly related to a decrease in both bullying and victimization (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Although there is a considerable body of research on bullying, there is a lack of research on the perception of parents of children who are bullied. The support parents acquire may effect whether they respond effectively to their child who has disclosed victimization and whether they are attuned to signs indicating their child might be experiencing bullying.

2. Problem Statement
Evaluations of school-based bullying prevention interventions report mixed results. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the role of parents of children who are bullied. Most research focuses on children involved or perspectives of teachers.

3. Research Questions
We focused on two questions. First, we examined the effect of an universal school-based Dutch Skills4Life program for adolescents on bullying (study 1). Second, we focused on the factors that may help parents to deal with the bullying situation (study 2).

4. Purpose of the Study
This study adds to research in the field of bullying by examining the effects of a social and emotional skills program on bullying and by highlighting the, according to parents, effective support parents acquire to help their child.
5. Research Methods

Study 1

Participants

In this study, 1342 students participated. The participants ranged in age from 13 to 16 years (mean age, $M = 14.3$) 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 51% in the control group were boys. In the experimental group 53% consisted of boys.

Procedure and analysis

A randomized controlled trial was used to study the effects of the Skills4Life program. The schools were assigned to the experimental or control condition. 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).

Multi-level regression analysis was used to calculate effects of the Skills4Life 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 $p < 0.10$.

Study 2

Participants

In the second study 15 parents of 14 children participated. The parent sample consisted of 10 mothers, 1 father and 2 mother-father couples. The children were in the age of 4-13. 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.
Procedure and analysis

This study used basic qualitative methods to examine the views of parents regarding children who experience bullying according to their parents. Parents were recruited through advertisements in newspapers and on websites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents. During the interviews, parents were asked to nominate possible interventions which they think will support them and help to stop the bullying. Interviews were analyzed to create categories and themes. Constant comparison led to grouping of similar concepts about parents’ perception. Reliability of the data were further ensured through audio-taping and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews.

6. Findings

Study 1
The results showed a statistically significant improvement in bullying. Students in the experimental group reported being bullied less frequently compared to the control group in the short term (T0 vs T1: OR=0.30, B.I.0.10-0.92). In the long term there were no significant results. However, in 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).

Study 2
Parents of bullied children were asked what kind of support they use and acquire. Over half of the parents pointed out that they want to communicate with teachers about their experiences. These parents perceived bullying as a shared responsibility of teachers and parents and stated that the bullying decrease when school offered assistance to the child and the parents. To support her child, 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 parents reported that they don't feel being taken seriously by the teachers. Nearly all of the parents affirmed the importance of talking with other parents of bullied children and the children that bully. At the same time, parents pointed out that they feel insecure about this, because they don't know the point of view of the other parents. The way parents advised their children to respond to the child who bullied them varied. They indicated that they are insecure about how to handle this problem. Nearly all of the parents affirmed the importance of telling a teacher or consulting a social worker. Many of the parents stated that they tried to give assurances to their child as a way to improve their self-esteem. Parents also described that they don't have the proper parental skills to support their child. Finally, parents expressed a strong desire to learn ways to help their child.
open up to them about their experiences and to teach them skills and strategies to handle the bully situation.

7. Conclusions
This study examined the effects of a Skills4Life program on bullying and explored which factors according to parents help them to deal with bullying situations. The results indicated a short-term decrease of being bullied and a long-term decrease of bullying behavior. The support parents receive is important because it can influence their subsequent actions and their reactions to the children (Sawyer et al., 2011). Diversity was apparent in the ways parents wanted to be supported in helping their bullied children. A number of parents indicated that they want to cooperate with teachers en see bullying as a shared responsibility. Some of the parents in this study proposed exchanges of stories with and support by other parents. A number of parents stated they lack the skills to support their bullied child. This outcome suggests the need for a Skills4Life program for parents. Such a program is particularly important in that parents are actually trained in general parental skills, encompassing both strengthening themselves as well as supporting their children.

8. References

