

Ideally, bullying prevention should start in kindergarten and elementary school. The Bernese program examined in this article trains teachers how to tackle bullying between young children effectively.

2

The Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School

Françoise D. Alsaker, Stefan Valkanover

DESPITE THE GROWING interest in bullying in school, studies that address this issue in kindergarten are still rare.¹ Studies focusing on victimization in kindergarten have clearly demonstrated that the rate at which victimization occurs in the early childhood years is comparable to that in grade school and that it has an immensely stressful effect on young children.²

Repeated victimization experiences may elicit intense negative emotions, including feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, and shame. Victimized young children report being afraid of their peers in day care centers and get higher social anxiety scores (teacher ratings) in kindergarten and in elementary school (self-report).³ Interestingly, the latter result was true for both passive and aggressive victims. As could be expected, school-aged children who are victimized have been shown to be afraid of going to school, which even leads to truancy in older students.⁴ Finally, victims' anxiety has been demonstrated to be a consequence of victimization experiences and to make them more vulnerable to subsequent episodes of victimization.⁵

In addition, victimization by peers has been demonstrated to lead to depressed mood in both school-age students and kindergartners.⁶ Victimized kindergarten children have also been reported to show increases in depressed mood over a two-year period after entering elementary school.⁷

In sum, all studies conducted on kindergarten children demonstrate that bullying problems occur at this early age. Also, most characteristics of school-age bullying are already present in kindergarten (for example, roles and witness behavior), and they have the same negative consequences.⁸ Knowing that victimization may result in stable negative expectations for peer relationships and negative self-evaluations and that negative experiences with peers influence the child's expectations, motivation, and behavior in school, we argue that it is important that victimization prevention begins in preschool and at the latest in kindergarten.⁹ In fact, teaching contexts in kindergarten are ideal for implementing prevention programs against victimization. The adult-to-child ratio is usually somewhat higher than in elementary school (depending on the country) and teaching schedules are highly flexible, providing teachers with many opportunities to incorporate program elements in their teaching.¹⁰

The Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School (Be-Prox) was designed to develop and maintain teachers' ability to handle bullying behavior and prevent victimization. Be-Prox was developed in 1998 in the frame of a research project (and was based on well-known principles used in school programs against bullying and in various programs for developing social-cognitive skills training.¹¹

Main theoretical ideas

There is broad consensus in the literature that bullying is an aggressive behavior systematically targeting specific children and lasting for extended periods of time; moreover, bullying is a social phenomenon involving all children in a class.¹² We also view teach-

ers as involved in the bullying problems themselves because they are part of the class system and often witness bullying episodes without noticing how serious the incidents are.¹³ Therefore, teachers have to become aware of their central role in this process. Also, even if an outside expert could help stop an actual bullying problem in a class, bullying problems may come back in the same class or appear in another class some years later. Teachers will regularly confront this problem. Therefore, they are the target group in Be-Prox. The goal is to teach them to detect bullying problems at an early stage, talk about bullying and victimization, prevent occurrences of bullying, and intervene when bullying does occur and stop it.

Be-Prox can be characterized as a systemic and value-oriented approach. It aims to change teachers' attitudes and abilities in confronting bullying and to introduce positive values that are central to healthy interactions in a class.

Teachers' understanding of bullying is often limited, and because many feel insecure and often experience having very little support from colleagues when bullying problems occur, Be-Prox is based on transfer of knowledge and support.¹⁴ Knowledge is important, but it does not suffice. Teachers' insecurity about their right to intervene and their ability to solve bullying problems often prevents them from taking action. Therefore, developing teachers' awareness and offering them support play a central role in the program. Because teachers often need support from colleagues to be efficient in handling bullying, group sessions are an integral part of Be-Prox. We recommend forming groups with teachers from the same school to ensure that teachers help one another solve problems that arise after the course and supervision are over.

All elements of Be-Prox are based on empirical knowledge about bullying:

- Bullying is a social phenomenon; all children and adults are involved.
- It may be difficult to recognize bullying, especially when the forms used are subtle.

- Nobody talks about it, and it is often trivialized.
- Children who are victimized cannot defend themselves adequately and have little support.
- Bullying is highly rewarding for the bullies.
- Bullies are clearly lacking empathy and moral motivation.
- Bullying has tremendous psychological consequences.

Program elements and the implementation model

In our program, teachers have focused supervision for approximately four months as the program is implemented. We usually organize six group sessions (we used eight in our first implementation of the program) and give teachers specific tasks to work on between meetings.¹⁵ All meetings follow the same basic agenda:

1. Information about specific topics is given.
2. Implications of the new information are discussed.
3. Specific implementation tasks are introduced.
4. Teachers work in groups to develop ways to implement antibullying practices in their classes.
5. Teachers are urged to implement the specific preventive elements in the time between the meetings, and possible upcoming problems are addressed.

The next meeting starts with a discussion of teachers' experiences with implementing the tasks established in the previous meeting.

Since our first implementation of the program, the agenda for the meetings has been changed slightly to meet teachers' needs. For example, we give teachers some more time at the beginning, to learn about bullying and to consider the usefulness of prevention, before they start talking about victimization with the children, and we combine some other topics in a meeting. We now use the term *module* instead of *meeting*, because it makes the program more flexible: one module, for example, can be addressed over two meetings. The overall model of Be-Prox has remained the same since its start, however.

Module 1: Sensitization: “Subjective attitudes”

The main purpose of the first module (and meeting) is sensitization. Specific aspects of victimization are presented. Teachers are encouraged to think about their own attitudes toward children involved in bullying and to make a commitment to values against it. Early diagnosis of victimization patterns is emphasized, along with information about different types of conflicts or aggressive encounters and bully-victim problems. Because we think that bullying prevention is very much a matter of values, we give teachers some more time to prepare for the prevention program than we did at the beginning of our work with Be-Prox before assigning specific tasks. However, we do start addressing the importance of communication with parents and ask teachers to begin preparing a meeting with parents in which they will inform them about their work to address bullying. In fact, the issue of work with parents is addressed in all modules.

Module 2: Bullying may be hard to detect: “Look at it”

Issues that may interact with the early recognition of bullying and victimization are discussed, and new information is introduced. The task given to the teachers in the weeks between the first and second meeting is called “look at it.” We emphasize the potential of teachers’ own “bad feelings” and intuition in the early detection process. They are invited to observe their students’ behavior systematically during the weeks following the meeting. Different approaches are discussed, but teachers are free to choose a method they feel comfortable with. They may also fill out questionnaires that we use in our research. They can decide how they want to document their observations or how they want to use the information in the questionnaires for themselves.

Module 3: The rule of silence: “Let’s talk together about bullying and victimization”

This meeting starts with a discussion of the experiences teachers have had with their systematic observations. Then the discussion

moves on to information concerning the rule of silence in bullying. This refers to findings that bullies, victims, and the other children never talk about bullying and that adults usually follow the same rule and do not address it either. We focus on how bullies use this rule of silence to gain even more power over the class and the teacher. Then we argue that breaking the rule of silence is a central element in preventing bullying.

Next, we ask teachers to discuss how to introduce the topic in their class. Their task is to sensitize the children, just as they themselves were sensitized to the urgency of preventing (or stopping) bullying. Our experience is that many teachers feel uncomfortable about talking about victimization with the children, specifically when they have not directly observed harsh bullying in their classes. Therefore, we discuss softer ways to address it, starting with the issue of good and bad feelings. Our experience is that children nearly always report bullying experiences when they start explaining what bad feelings are.¹⁶

Module 4: Rules against bullying: “The contract”

Bullying is highly dependent on reward structures in the class. The importance of rules, limits, and structure for children’s development is discussed. Also, the role of the so-called noninvolved children in (indirectly) rewarding bullies is addressed. Bullying can be prevented or stopped only if new attitudes and norms can be established against victimization of peers. Knowledge about the role of bullying attitudes, bullies’ deficits in empathy and moral motivation, and their use of moral disengagement strategies are discussed, as well as the implication of these findings.¹⁷

Following a description of experiences of various programs, the meeting emphasizes the importance of a positive team spirit in the class and the value of developing a behavior code with the children.¹⁸ Teachers are invited to have a closer look at the Kandersteg Declaration against Bullying that was initiated by the first author in 2007 (www.kanderstegdeclaration.com) and consider using it in their work with the children’s parents, their colleagues, and older students. Teachers and their students are free to agree on their

own way to define behavior rules and make a contract with another. In kindergarten and first grade, children make drawings describing which kind of behavior should be enhanced or reduced. Because teachers often establish rules themselves without discussing them with the children, the importance of the participation of the children is underlined in order to ensure the commitment of all students.

Feedback on discussions with the children and the implementation of rules has been highly positive. Children are usually eager to work on the rules and produce many suggestions and drawings. Many teachers report that the children were proud of the behavior code they produced.¹⁹

Module 5: Take action: “The use of positive and negative sanctions”

Agreeing about a behavior code and even signing a contract is not enough to prevent (or stop) bullying if teachers do not follow up. The topic of this module is the importance of consistent teacher behavior, positive and negative sanctions, and the use of basic learning principles. Previous experiences showed how important it is to discuss these issues in depth.²⁰ Teachers’ insecurity about bullying and also about their role as teachers often inhibits consistent reactions to bullying behavior. We call the task given to the teachers “Take Action,” which means that they should systematically and consistently use positive and negative sanctions, remind children about the contract when needed, and reinforce positive behavior.

Teachers are encouraged to talk with the children about appropriate reactions in case a student breaks the rules and about positive and negative sanctions. The role of teachers is central: they must show that they are serious about not allowing any bullying in their class. We encourage discussions about rewarding positive changes in the class and motivating all children to help each other act in accordance with the contract.

Our experience is that the issue of reporting on bullying behavior or requesting help from the teacher versus tattling on peers has

to be addressed because tattling is a sensitive issue. Many teachers were concerned about introducing a tattling culture in their classes if children were encouraged to report on rule transgressions regarding bullying behavior.²¹

Teachers' tendencies to excuse aggressive behavior because of possible inner conflicts were intensely discussed in our first implementation of Be-Prox. In addition, the role of the teacher as a socialization agent and many teachers' reluctance to use negative sanctions is a recurrent and important topic. The tasks for the following implementation period are to:

- Discuss fairness, sanctions, and rewards with the children
- Note transgressions against the behavior code
- Reflect on existing reinforcement patterns around victims and bullies in the class
- Look for resources in the class

Module 6: Developing social competence

Social competence, empathy, and positive activities are the focus of the sixth, and last, module, and given the theoretical frame of the program, civil courage is emphasized. Teachers are invited to help children take the perspective of victimized children, tell bullies to stop, and report bullying behavior to an adult when they cannot help themselves (see also module 5)—and in general, to engage in helping and supporting each other in difficult situations. We also invite teachers to include physical activities and body awareness as part of the planned positive activities. They are asked to train children in differentiating between aggression and strength. Because victims generally perceive themselves as weaker than others and also are perceived as such by their peers even if physical tests do not support these views, educators need to develop victims' awareness of their own physical competence and strength and provide all children with a realistic perception of the strength of bullies.²²

Also, because victims have repeatedly been found to have some difficulty in setting limits, teachers are asked to emphasize each child's right to say no and everyone's duty to respect others' limits.

We recommend the use of very clear signs or symbols to communicate one's own limits. Teachers are asked to find adequate teaching material and use it with the children.

Concluding meeting: Consolidation through prevention goals

We arrange some time, mostly as part of the last meeting, to discuss with teachers how they can ensure that the prevention work will go on after the course ends. We encourage them to define some simple and easy-to-reach goals toward the overall goal of no tolerance for bullying.

By the end of the course, all teachers should have organized a meeting with parents. The issue is introduced as part of module 1, and it is followed up during the course. We offer some support in the form of discussions and provide materials if needed, but we do not participate in the meetings ourselves since we want teachers to experience their own ability to address bullying.

Evaluation results

This program was evaluated as part of a research project. A pre- and posttest design with a control and a prevention group was used.²³ The most interesting sources of information with respect to changes in occurrences of bullying and victimization were the children themselves.

Teacher data yielded no changes in reported bullying behavior for either the prevention group or the control group. Results on being victimized, however, showed significant interaction effects for three of four types of victimization. All changes in the control group were negative: different types of victimization had increased significantly. In the prevention group, scores on physical and indirect victimization had dropped significantly. Verbal victimization yielded no significant results.²⁴

Teachers in the prevention group invested much time in the program. Therefore, one could expect them to be eager to show at

posttest that bullying problems had declined. Teachers in the control group also spent much time completing questionnaires and organizing our interview visits. Consequently, they could also have been motivated to show that they managed well even without our program. Furthermore, teachers in the prevention group were highly sensitized to victimization, especially to subtle aggressive behavior. Thus, we could also have reported much more victimization at posttest than at pretest just because they were more aware of problems. In sum, there are good reasons to consider the results as valid.

One of the strengths of our project was the multi-informant design, opening up the possibility of analyzing information from the children themselves as observers of bullying (using a peer nomination method). Nominations by peers as “being a victim” were used to create a dichotomous variable (0 = no or one nomination received, 1 = at least two nominations) as an indication of risk of victimization. In the prevention group, there was a decrease of 15 percent in the number of children identified as possible victims. In the control group, there was an increase of 55 percent. We interpreted the increase reported by the children in the control group as a normal pattern when nothing is done to prevent or stop bullying. Other analyses of the peer nomination data gave similar results.²⁵ This finding corresponds to the results obtained on the basis of teachers’ data, suggesting either a decline in victimization in the prevention group or an increase in the control group.

The pretest/posttest comparisons of teachers’ attitudes and self-reported behavior also clearly demonstrated that teachers in the prevention group felt more secure in their ability to address bullying. They also reported at posttest that the children helped one another more than at pretest, and they found that children could learn to handle bullying situations. Also, in the prevention group, teachers were significantly less convinced that victimization occurs only “behind their back,” or that “some children are born to be victims.” All in all, their reports reflected a change toward a new attitude: “Victimization is a phenomenon teachers can be aware of and stop.”²⁶ There were no such changes in the control group.

Another encouraging finding was that teachers in the prevention group developed positive attitudes toward working with the parents of the kindergartners during the project time. They agreed almost unanimously that it was very important to work with the parents and that it made sense to talk with parents about this problem. During this same period of time, teachers from the control group had become rather negative toward parents.²⁷

The significant decrease in victimization in the prevention group may seem modest at first glance. However, when compared with the large increase in the control group, the reduction of victimization in the prevention groups must be qualified as substantial. Furthermore, the similarity of the findings based on teachers' reports and children's peer nominations indicates high reliability of the findings.

Farrington and Ttofi included our evaluation results in one of their meta-analyses on school-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. They used the prevalence data based on peer nominations. Be-Prox was one of the nineteen programs (out of forty-four retained for analysis) that appeared to be effective in reducing bullying or victimization, or both, based on significant odds ratios computed by the authors for the meta-analysis. Be-Prox yielded the highest odds ratio (3.14) in regard to reducing victimization.²⁸

Conclusion

Our findings and those in Farrington and Ttofi's meta-analysis confirm that Be-Prox works and that it is possible to conduct bullying prevention in kindergarten.²⁹ Changes in teachers' attitudes toward victimized children, the fact that they had gained confidence in handling bullying, and several positive changes in children's reactions in the presence of bullying all offer hope that these teachers will continue acting to prevent bullying or to stop it before an intricate bully-victim pattern can develop.³⁰ In the meantime, our program has also been used on many occasions with elementary school teachers and even in secondary schools.

Notes

1. Cook, C. R., Williams, K. R., Guerra, N. G., Kim, T. E., & Sadek, S. (2010). Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic investigation. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 25, 65–83.

2. Alsaker, F. D. (2003). *Quälgeister und ihre Opfer. Mobbing unter Kindern—und wie man damit umgeht*. Bern: Huber Verlag; Alsaker, F. D., & Valkanover, S. (2001). Early diagnosis and prevention of victimization in kindergarten. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: the plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 175–195). New York, NY: Guilford Press; Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996). Peer victimization: Cause or consequence of school maladjustment? *Child Development*, 67, 1305–1317; Monks, C. P., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (2003). Aggressors, victims, and defenders in preschool: Peer, self-, and teacher reports. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 49, 453–469.

3. Alsaker, F. D. (1993). Isolement et maltraitance par pairs dans les jardins d'enfants: comment mesurer ces phénomènes et quelles en sont leurs conséquences? *Enfance*, 47(3), 241–260; Alsaker, F. D. (2007). *Pathways to victimization and a multisetting intervention*. Bern: Swiss National Science Foundation.

4. Sharp, S. (1995). How much does bullying hurt? The effects of bullying on the personal well-being and educational progress of secondary-aged students. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 12, 81–88.

5. Siegel, R. S., La Greca, A. M., & Harrison, H. M. (2009). Peer victimization and social anxiety in adolescents: Prospective and reciprocal relationships. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 1096–1109.

6. Hanish, L. D., & Guerra, N. G. (2002). A longitudinal analysis of patterns of adjustment following peer victimization. *Development and Psychopathology*, 14, 69–89; Hawker, D.S.J., & Boulton, M. J. (2000). Twenty years' research on peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment: A meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41, 441–455; Stassen Berger, K. (2007). Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten? *Developmental Review*, 27, 90–126; Alsaker, F. D., & Nägele, C. (2008). Bullying in kindergarten and prevention. In W. Craig & D. Pepler (Eds.), *An international perspective on understanding and addressing bullying* (pp. 230–252). Kingston, Canada: PREVNet; Perren, S. A., & Alsaker F. D. (2009). Depressive symptoms from kindergarten to early school age: Longitudinal associations with social skills deficits and peer victimization. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 3, 28. www.capmh.com/content/3/1/28.

7. Snyder, J., Brooker, M., Patrick, M. R., Snyder, A., Schrepferman, L., & Stoolmiller, M. (2003). Observed peer victimization during early elementary school: Continuity, growth, and relation to risk for child antisocial and depressive behavior. *Child Development*, 74, 1881–1898.

8. Hauser, D., Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, E., & Alsaker, F. D. (2009). Kindergartenkinder als Zeugen von Mobbing. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung*, 31(1), 57–74.

9. Alsaker, F. D., & Olweus, D. (2002). Stability and change in global self-esteem and self-related affect. In T. M. Brinthaup & R. P. Lipka (Eds.),

Understanding early adolescent self and identity: Applications and interventions (pp. 193–223). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

10. Alsaker, F. D. (2004). The Bernese program against victimization in kindergarten and elementary school (Be-Prox). In P. K. Smith, D. Pepler, & K. Rigby (Eds.), *Bullying in schools: How successful can interventions be?* (pp. 289–306). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

11. Alsaker & Valkanover. (2001); Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school. What we know and what we can do*. Oxford: Blackwell; Sharp, S., & Smith, P. K. (1993). Tackling bullying: The Sheffield Project. In D. Tattum (Ed.), *Understanding and managing bullying* (pp. 45–56). London: Heinemann.

12. Rigby, K., Smith, P. K., & Pepler, D. (2004). Working to prevent school bullying: Key issues. In P. K. Smith, D. Pepler, & K. Rigby (Eds.), *Bullying in schools. How successful can interventions be?* (pp. 1–12). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Salmivalli, C. (2001). Group view on victimization. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school. The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 398–419). New York, NY: Guilford press.

13. Alsaker, F. D. (2012). *Mutig gegen Mobbing in Kindergarten und Schule*. Bern: Huber Verlag.

14. Alsaker. (2003); Roberts, W. B., Jr. (2008). *Working with parents of bullies and victims*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

15. Snyder et al. (2003).

16. Alsaker. (2004).

17. Gini, G. (2006). Social cognition and moral cognition in bullying: What's wrong? *Aggressive Behavior*, 32, 528–539; Hymel, S., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Bonanno, R. A., Vaillancourt, T., & Henderson, N. R. (2010). Bullying and morality: Understanding how good kids can behave badly. In S. R. Jimereson, S. M. Swearer, & D. Espelage (Eds.), *The handbook of school bullying. An international perspective* (pp. 101–118). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

18. Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, D., Solomon, J., & Schaps, E. (1989). Effects of an elementary school program to enhance prosocial behavior on children's cognitive-social problem-solving skills and strategies. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 10, 147–169; Bierman, K. L., Greenberg, M. T., & Group, C.P.P.R. (1996). Social skills training in the FAST Track Program. In R. Peters & R. J. McMahon (Eds.), *Preventing childhood disorders, substance abuse, and delinquency* (pp. 65–89). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Smith, P. K., Cowie, H., & Sharp, S. (1994). Working directly with pupils involved in bullying situations. In P. K. Smith & S. Sharp (Eds.), *School bullying: Insights and perspectives* (pp. 193–212). London: Routledge.

19. Alsaker. (2004).

20. Alsaker. (2004).

21. Alsaker. (2004).

22. Valkanover, S. (2005). *Intrigenspiel und Muskelkraft. Aspekte der Psychomotorik im Zusammenhang mit Mobbing im Kindergarten*. Bern: Haupt Verlag.

23. Alsaker. (2004); Alsaker & Valkanover. (2001).

24. Alsaker & Valkanover. (2001).

25. Alsaker & Valkanover. (2001).

26. Alsaker. (2003); Alsaker & Valkanover. (2001).

27. Alsaker. (2003).
28. Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2009). School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2009, 6. http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/news/_reduction_bullying_schools.php.
29. Farrington & Ttofi. (2009).
30. Alsaker & Nägele. (2008).

FRANÇOISE D. ALSAKER *is a professor in developmental psychology at the University of Berne, Switzerland.*

STEFAN VALKANOVER *is a senior lecturer in sport pedagogy at the University of Berne, Switzerland.*