Social Problem Solving as a Key Component of Bullying Prevention Programs

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Abstract

Various prevention programs have been developed by countries around the world to reduce bullying and other forms of youth peer abuse. Social problem solving is inherently a part of any bullying prevention curriculum regardless of cultural differences, but rarely is given the recognition and attention it deserves. Scholarly evidence is provided to demonstrate the critical importance of social problem solving as an essential aspect for success of bullying prevention programs. How social problem solving can influence bullies, targets, and bystanders along with suggestions for future research are provided.

Key Words: Social problem solving, bullying, prevention programs

Introduction

Social Problem Solving as a Key Component of Bullying Prevention Programs

Bullying is a widely discussed issue affecting youth that carries with it a sense of urgency to implement programs to prevent and intervene in bullying situations (Carney & Hazler, 2016; National Education Association, 2011). Cross-national research on bullying has been done for years with major consequences for abusers (Farrington & Baldry, 2010), targets, and bystanders (Carney, Hazler, Oh, Hibble, Granger, 2010; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011) gaining worldwide attention of educators and in policymakers (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). The seriousness across cultures has caused countries around the world to establish policies and laws seeking to reduce bullying, provide supportive intervention for targets of bullying, and specify appropriate interventions and consequences for abusers. In the U.S., the majority of states now have legislation mandating school personnel to integrate bullying prevention into their schools (Nickerson, Cornell, Smith, & Furlong, 2014).

One relatively recent cross-national study explored bullying across 40 countries found that exposure to bullying ranged from approximately 9-45% for boys and 5-36% for girls (Craig, Harel-Fisch, Fogel-Grinvald et. al., 2009). These findings indicated that boys reported higher rates of bullying in all countries with unique geographic patterns of bullying existing that seem to be related to whether or not there is a country-wide bullying prevention efforts in place. Regardless of the particular country or community, the negative consequences associated with bullying can include physical, academic, biological, cognitive, emotional, psychological, and social problems for all involved (Blake, Banks, Patience, & Lund, 2014). McDougall and Vaillancourt's (2015) review of the literature categorizes research findings across academic functioning, physical health and neurobiology, social relationships, self-perceptions, and internalizing as well as externalizing mental health issues.

Students involved in bullying have been shown to be at higher risk for suicidality (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), substance use (Luk, Wang, & Simons-Morton, 2012), and mental health issues (D'Esposito, Blake, & Riccio, 2011; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Hinduja and Patchin (2010) reported that higher suicide attempt rates were found for both bullying perpetrators (2.1 times higher) and targets (1.7 times higher). Targets and perpetrators of both traditional and cyberbullying were found to be two times more likely to have a suicide attempt than youth who were not victimized. Bullying is not the only variable related to suicide ideation and attempts, but it does exacerbate the instability adolescents already may be feeling (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Farrington and Baldry (2010) specifically outlined numerous biopsychosocial risk factors for those who exhibit bullying behavior. The authors assert that bully perpetrators tend to be male and engage more in direct bullying behavior (violence & aggression, both threat & behavior), whereas females who engage in bullying employ more indirect bullying behavior (social isolation & spreading rumors). Perpetrators also tend to be higher in aggression, more impulsive, have difficulty with attention, and achieve at a lower rate compared to peers. Psychologically, they tend to lack empathy, have lower self-esteem, and higher rates of depression than other school children. Socially, perpetrators are often rejected by one set of peers leading them to build friendships with others who engage in bullying behavior (Farrington & Baldry, 2010).

Bullying situations revolve around relationships and social dynamics (Rodkin, Espleage, & Hanish, 2015) making social problem-solving a critical part of the resolution. Bullying is defined as an ongoing relational pattern of aggressive verbal, physical, and/or relational intent to cause harm by a perpetrator who has more power than the intended target (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011). The uniqueness of bullying compared to other forms of social problems makes the design of social problem solving methods a critical variable in prevention and intervention efforts. It is this relationship of bullying to social problem solving that makes a model for implementing social problem solving in bullying within prevention and intervention efforts critical, and is the focus of this article.

Bullying prevention policies in schools have been designed to address behavioral issues with disciplinary actions (Goodman-Scott, Doyle, & Brott, 2013) and often provide interventions for bullying perpetrators (Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, Jr., & Sanchez, 2007). Such disciplinary actions emphasize student behavior management techniques, but they also create a dynamic of expected external control for behavioral choices made. Students targeted by others who bully do gain some protection through established disciplinary actions, but disciplining perpetrators alone does not produce long-range outcomes (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Targets, perpetrators, and bystanders need to gain the skills and confidence to personally better deal social relationships (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011). They need understanding of the relationship dynamics inherent in the abuse and how to use that information to better deal with future socially problematic situations. It is these social relationship factors that social problem solving is designed to influence.

Social problem solving has been shown to have an impact on many risk factors associated with both perpetrators and targets of bullying such as coping strategies and self-control (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999), reducing aggression (Takahashi, Koseki, & Shimada, 2009), lowering depression (Zhang, Li, Gong, & Ungar, 2013), and improving school achievement and academic motivation (Dubow & Tisak, 1989). The importance of implementing social-problem solving in bullying prevention and intervention efforts first requires an understanding of social problem solving and other terms that are often used inaccurately in place of social problem solving. This clearer recognition of social problem solving makes it clearer how it is needed as a key component in the success of bullying prevention and intervention programs.

Problem Solving Models

The literature often infers problem solving, conflict resolution, and social problem solving to be the same thing, by using the terms almost interchangeably. Each term, however, is unique, so that clarifying definitions is imperative in order to create productive problem solving among individuals or groups. Problem solving is a general umbrella term while conflict resolution comes under that umbrella with the focus on overcoming conflict between two or more participants (Barsky, 2014). Social problem solving provides more detail in both

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internal and external processes and also defines viable parameters to the prevention or intervention environment (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007). Recognizing and using appropriate terminology is necessary for quality application and research so that it is not confused with other related concepts.

General Problem Solving

Problem solving can be found in many disciplines, for example education (Care, Scoular, & Griffin, 2016), chemistry (Temel & Morgil, 2012), and physics (Ali, Abd-Talib, Ibrahim, Surif, & Abdullah, 2016). These diverse disciplines use the term and a combination of logic and behavioral applications to find and test solutions to difficult and complex problems in their unique field. Problem solving in counseling is also used generically to describe finding solutions to multiple issues, such as memory and traumatic brain injury (Kennedy & Coelho, 2005), major psychiatric disorders and stress from daily life events (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010). These examples all focus on the general idea of finding a solution to a difficult or complex problem, and illustrate the umbrella nature of the term.

General problem solving in a bullying situation might take any number of behavioral forms that adults or youth see as a logical step. A typical problem solving response to a bullying situation might be to place students involved in locations and situations where they cannot interact such as physically moving the classroom seats of students involved in classroom bullying or having them sit far apart on the school bus. Other actions would be to apply a disciplinary model to the perpetrator or simply tell all involved to cease the interactions. These solutions address the immediate, visible, and surface conditions, but do not address feelings of powerlessness that targets and bystanders are likely to experience. Such problem solving actions miss the root social factors causing the behaviors and emotions tied to the interaction of perpetrators, targets, and bystanders.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution relates to the numerous methods that people use to resolve a social conflict (Barsky, 2014). The goal is to settle the dispute usually between two parties. The ways in which the opposing individuals or parties go about settling the dispute vary greatly based on the culture from which they originate and the resources available for resolution. Conflict resolution focuses on settling disputes with a narrower focus than problem solving. Much has been written on conflict resolution and the concept has appeared in various studies including humans (Van Zant & Kray, 2015) and even animals (e.g., examining insect colonies, Ratnieks, Foster, & Wenseleers, 2006). The phrase used in education and mental health professions is more narrowly defined than general problem solving as it relates to the process of resolving conflicts between two or more people (Barsky, 2014).

Mediation is the most frequent use of conflict resolution in schools, but it requires establishing equality of power and influence between the parties in conflict, which is the case in many disputes. Such power and influence equality is not the case in a bullying situation where disparity in size, social skills, or other relationship skills gives one party more power and control in the relationship (Hazler & Carney, 2012), thus making mediation less appropriate for bullying intervention.

Conflict resolution works in many types of school disputes, but is not an early step in bullying disputes, because the unequal power and influence in bullying situations makes solutions less realistic and potentially exacerbates the problem. Mediation might gain surface agreement between parties, but the unequal power dynamics and interpersonal relationship issues remain, now including heightened visibility and frustrations that can make the situation

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worse. A more effective intervention is required that would give more attention to the power differences and underlying relationship factors.

Social Problem Solving

Social problem solving is defined as "the self-directed cognitive-behavioral process by which an individual, couple, or group attempts to identify or discover effective solutions for specific problems encountered in everyday living" (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007, p. 19). McGuire (2001) adds depth to the definition as, "'a goal-directed sequence of cognitive and affective operations as well as behavioral responses for the purpose of adapting to internal or external demands or challenges" (p. 211). Social problem solving goes beyond the general problem solving and conflict resolution concepts to more specifically define the issues and the systems for solving interpersonal problems. This concept most closely matches the relationship and interpersonal needs of bully/target situations in the context of educational settings and the mental health field.

Social problem solving does more that identify equitable solutions by dealing with all variables within a person, between people, and the situational context. The concept challenges individuals to examine internal processes (e.g. thoughts, beliefs and opinions, biases and stereotypes, and culture) and how those play a role in behaviors. These additional factors are the key to why social problem solving needs to be a core component of bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

Two major stages make up the social problem solving model: problem orientation and specific problem solving skills (D'Zurilla, Nezu & Maydeu-Olivares, 2004). These two components promote individuals' awareness of their approach to social problem solving by gaining a better understanding of the problem, one's specific orientation to it, and developing the skills needed to deal with the problem.

Problem orientation incorporates a metacognitive process (cognitive-affective-behavioral response set) "that reflects a person's general awareness and perceptions of problems in living, as well as his or her own problem solving ability" (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007, p. 21). These are the automatic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors individuals generally bring to a life problem that are rooted in previous difficult experiences and social problem solving attempts. Such reactions incorporate an individual's sense of self-efficacy at solving the problem, determining the source of the problem, and recognizing the problem's impact on the individual. D'Zurilla, Nezu and Maydeu-Olivares (2004) propose two dimensions of this construct with *positive problem orientation* being constructive and *negative problem orientation* being dysfunctional.

The feelings addressed by problem orientation are the emotions that individuals have when encountering a problem. Individuals will either approach and address the problem (positive problem orientation), or avoid it by becoming quickly frustrated or by doubting their own self-efficacy and instead depending on others to solve it for them (negative problem orientation). Only when the individual understands the problem orientation component can the social problem solving skills be effectively implemented.

Social problem solving interventions are the best fit for bullying situations. The orientation phase includes spending time with participants individually to determine the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of related to the themselves and the situation. Exploring experiences where an individual or group felt empowered or disempowered in a given situation can help promote understanding of what may be encouraging similar problematic behaviors in current situations. It also helps bring feelings to the surface where they can be used to build necessary empathy toward others, which is a cornerstone in the treatment of

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abusive situations like bullying (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011). Effective problem orientation thus promotes understanding of self and others in the bullying situation and creates opportunity for exploring more effective thoughts and behaviors. This exploration opens the door for developing the social problem solving skills needed to more effectively negotiate difficult relationships.

Specific problem solving skills are goal directed and follow a sequential process to include (a) defining or formulating the problem, (b) alternative solution generation, (c) making a decision, and (d) implementation of solution and assessment (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007). The implementation of these skills requires the continual attention of understanding ones' self and others in order to minimize the power and influence inequalities that facilitate bullying and limit social problem solving potential. The first step in the problem solving process is defining and formulating the problem, which requires people to gather relevant facts about the problem including others' perspectives, clearly understand the problem's essence, and generate several possible realistic goals. They then can engage in the process of generating, discovering, or identifying several solutions to the problem (D'Zurilla, Nezu & Maydeu-Olivares, 2004). This necessary information and understanding allows individuals to make viable decisions about which solution(s) seem best for the problem.

The next phase of the process uses implementation of the solution and assessment of outcome skills that allow for the application and monitoring of the solution as well as the revising of solution implementation for better outcomes. The assessment component allows people to recognize the issues and problems, evaluate them, and recycle the process to obtain the next potential solution step. While these phases are common to many problem solving models, the social and relationship aspects of social problem solving are uniquely important to bullying situations.

Social Problem Solving in Bullying Prevention Programs

Bullying prevention programs initially focused on addressing bullying behaviors, identifying and understanding what constitutes bullying, and providing a framework for implementing disciplinary measures for the perpetrators (Hazler & Carney, 2012). Programs have matured since then with program developers identifying and incorporating other critical variables. The environment is now recognized as both as a stage on which behaviors are enacted and a social learning opportunity where bullying victims, bystanders, and perpetrators can learn how to respond as well as how the environment responds to them (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015).

Addressing the learning aspect of the environment requires bullying prevention programs to incorporate some form of social learning into the curriculum (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015). Social problem solving provides learning in the form of information and strategies for targets, perpetrators and bystanders to navigate the social environment to make better decisions, and change behavior. It can further address individual concerns such as reducing depression (Zhang, Li, Gong, & Ungar, 2013), increasing self-efficacy on cognitive, emotional and behavioral domains (Frauenknecht & Black, 2004), and decreasing stress and violence (Takahashi, Koseki, & Shimada, 2009). Social problem solving also impacts social issues, group dynamics, students' fears of dangers in the school environmental, school connectedness (Dubow & Tisak, 1989), and bullying behavior (LeBlanc, Self-Brown, & Kelly, 2011).

Social Problem Solving for Perpetrators

Aggression is common in some children who do not have the words and/or social skills to communicate their needs or negotiate their social environment (Takahashi, Koseki, &

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Shimada, 2009). Social problem solving teaches children how to think through solutions related to social situations in ways that are collaborative and amicable to those involved. Takahashi, Koseki, and Shimada (2009) studied social problem solving's impact on aggression in fourth through ninth grade students. Their findings indicate that social problem solving effectiveness varied with higher grades better able to navigate social problem solving, thus indicating the need for taking developmental considerations into account when creating social problem solving interventions for different ages. Social problem solving skills included in bullying prevention and intervention programs can impact perpetrators by providing ways to recognize and negotiate feelings and needs in meaningful and socially appropriate ways that match the cognitive and social developmental levels of participants.

Joseph and Strain (2010) cite several studies of children who lacked social problem solving skills and tended to use aggression to address conflict with others. The aggressive behaviors became more predictable and less alterable the older the child got and predicted future criminal behavior, rejection from others, and poor mental health. Social problem solving understanding and skills learned as children can reduce aggression, increase school connectedness, strengthen mental health, and develop the social competence needed to mend ruptures in social relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). What they learn can then be used to head off or lesson future relationship dilemmas. Bullying prevention programs that incorporate these will then meet both the short-range intervention and long-term prevention goals for youth.

Social Problem Solving for Targets and Bystanders

Social problem solving impacts mental health, which is critical, because those exposed to bullying have increased depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, and greater risk for suicidal ideation (Carney, Jacob, & Hazler, 2011; Swearer, Espelage, Vallencourt & Hymel, 2010). Social problem solving appears to provide a protective function that decreases depressive symptoms (Zhang, Li, Gong, & Ungar, 2013) and hopelessness that are two risk factors for suicidal ideation (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007). The value of reducing depression and hopelessness has particular value for school bullying prevention programs because it is useful across the multiple cultures that vary greatly across schools (see Mathew & Nanoo, 2013; Takahashi, Koseki, & Shimada, 2009).

Social problem solving is even more broadly a protective factor for students who are exposed to a variety of violence types. LeBlanc, Self-Brown, and Kelly (2011) found that social problem solving and communication skills limited the distress for students who were exposed to violence. All students with high problem solving and communication skills were also better at a variety of other social and leadership skills. These social problem solving skills appear to increase adolescents' ability to access social support systems and utilize other resources in the school environment needed to reduce potential distress.

School itself can be a difficult time for children and adolescents due missing family support, regular interactions with new people, and an environment over which they have less control than others. Being exposed to bullying or a target of bullying is more likely to occur here and adds significant additional stress and adjustment issues. It has been long known that social problem solving provides a stress-buffering effect for children entering middle school regardless of their initial level of stress (Dubow & Tisak, 1989). Grade Point Average (GPA), teacher-rated school behaviors, and parent-rated home behaviors are all impacted by this effect. Increases in social problem solving improve students' ability to adjust to life stressors increased including those related to exposure to bullying.

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Further Recommendations

Some scholars believe increased awareness and actions are causing a decrease in peer abuse (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004), while others believe that bullying is still on the rise (Esbensen & Carson, 2009). Regardless of which is true, schools and societies around the world have been given social mandates to address bullying in schools (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Some programs and their components have been shown to be more effective than others. Current literature suggests a comprehensive sustainable approach (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) where the strongest outcomes go beyond a one-time intervention (duration), involve more contact hours (intensity), provide teacher and parent training, and incorporate social problem solving into the program. Having more components in the program also increases effectiveness, but it is unclear what those components might be. Future research should look at components that would provide the strongest outcomes (Hazler & Carney, 2012).

Studies suggest that bullying prevention programs have reduced bullying behavior by 20%, largely due to the focus on disciplinary behavior and less on the etiology of the behavior (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Other research shows that social problem solving can produce positive effects on elements of bullying, reduce the negative effects of poor mental health, and even promote traditional school achievement issues (Mathew & Nanoo, 2013). The combination of social problem solving factors in bullying prevention programs needs a more careful examination in order to expand that initial 20% reduction in bullying and resulting social, personal, and academic related problems.

Bully perpetrators need to be better understood when developing bullying prevention programs. A more thorough understanding of underlying reasons that youth bully others and the ways programs can utilize that knowledge to refocus the source of that energy into more socially productive actions would greatly enhance outcomes for perpetrators and everyone around them. Because social problem solving reduces aggression and improves school and home behaviors (Leblanc, Self-Brown, Shepard, & Kelly, 2011), it would appear to be an excellent variable for this refocusing effort. The research, then, would be focused on identifying ways to increase appropriate and healthy alternative behaviors.

The past fifteen years have seen policy reaction to the increase of suicide attempts and acts of violence resulting from bullying, with school officials and local policy makers calling for programs to focus on intervention and reactivity (Limber & Small, 2003; Winburn, Winburn, & Niemeyer, 2014). Intervention is beneficial in addressing immediate crises, but a more preventive approach is needed to address prevention. Bullying prevention programs with social problem solving skills need more frequent implementation and evaluation in early childhood where these skills can be gained in developmentally appropriate ways (Joseph & Strain, 2010). This approach would have the added value of including parents when they are most involved, address behaviors at home, and support the research that shows incorporating parents into the prevention programming is more effective (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Hammond, 2007). Such a longitudinal approach on early intervention programs would add to current research by determining if and to what degree social problem solving buffers the effect on later bullying, victimization, and bystander behaviors.

Finally, the literature needs to come to a consensus on the definition of social problem solving to address bullying as a form of interpersonal conflict. Using conflict resolution, problem solving, and social problem solving interchangeably leads to confusion and negatively impacts the quality of research being conducted by diminishing the operational definition of important variables.

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