Changing the Social Contexts of Peer Victimization

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Abstract

Introduction: While school-based prevention programs often target deficits in individual children's social skills in order to limit their aggression or exposure to peer victimization, there is increasing evidence that school-wide and classroom-level factors can affect the success of these programs. Method: We describe the WITS Primary Program which takes a community development approach for the prevention of victimization. It was designed for kindergarten to grade 3 students, and aims to create responsive communities for the prevention of peer victimization by engaging the support of parents, teachers, school counselors, older students, and emergency services personnel. Results: Evidence supporting the program's feasibility and effectiveness are reported. Conclusion: The prevention of peer victimization and bullying may require targeted programs with demonstrated support from many adults in young children's social networks.

Key words: bullying, victimization, children, and prevention

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Introduction

Several studies have identified behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, disruptiveness) and emotional problems (e.g., worrying, anxiety, fearfulness) as risks for physical and relational victimization by peers (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). While peer victimization occurs in an interpersonal context that frequently includes not only peers, but often parents and other adults, few intervention programs have taken a multi-systems approach to preventing victimization. In this paper, we describe a peer victimization prevention program called "WITS the Rock Solid Primary Program" that invites participation from communities, school personnel and parents in an effort to create contexts that are responsive to young children's requests for help with peer victimization. We also anticipate that school-based counselors and psychologists can serve as "champions" in starting and maintaining the program in their schools and also could make use of the program's resources to help aggressive and victimized children and their families and teachers.

A number of school-based prevention programs are widely available (see reviews by Miller, Brehm, & Whitehouse, 1998; Smith Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). These typically focus on improving children's problem solving skills, social and emotional competence, and capacity to resist bullying. They are generally based on written curricula that are delivered by classroom teachers - sometimes supported by mental health professionals. Several competence-training programs have shown improvements in children's social skills (Miller et al., 1998), but only a few have been successful in reducing victimization or bullying (Smith et al., 2004). There is growing evidence that family, school and classroom contexts influence children's aggression and social competence (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004) and can also affect the success of these prevention programs (Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaudry, & Samples, 1998; Harnish & Guerra, 2000; Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998). Contexts of Victimization

Classroom contexts may be particularly important. In elementary schools, classroom compositions determine the peers who children are
subsequently associated with non-deviant peers were targeted for an intervention program to improve further highlighted the importance of positive peer children compared to control group children. Vitaro, were higher in grades 4 to 6 in intervention group of social understanding and conflict resolution skills Battistich, Schaps, and Delucchi (1996) found levels and are supportive of one another, Solomon, Watson, creating classrooms where classmates care about grade 6 (Kellam et al., 1998). In a follow-up evaluation aggression on boys' risks for behavioral problems in behaviors buffered the effect of classroom levels of prevention program for children in grades 2 to 6. The "Resolving Conflict Creatively Program" violence neighborhood contexts on the effectiveness of the investigated the effects of classroom and group homogeneity. Similarly, Aber et al. (1998) suggest that emotionally distressed children may be victimized by their more competent peers to maintain competent children. Bukowski and Sippola (2001) have been in grade 1 classrooms with more socially emotional problems reported increases in addition, children who showed higher levels of risks for peer victimization by the end of grade 2. In grade 6 (Kellam et al., 1998) found that classroom-based intervention efforts (Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2002). In one long-term follow-up study of a intervention program, "The Good Behavior Game," Kellam et al. (1998) found that class-based prevention program, "The Good WITS program was a coordinated initiative between elementary school educators, The Rock Solid Foundation (a community-based not-for-profit police language and common strategies to everyone in environments that speak with a uniform voice to resolvable and that adults know how to help them. The WITS program focuses on the prevention of victimization (rather than bullying) because bullies are often themselves the children's experiences of victimization and aggression. The "WITS" acronym stands for W enhance students' social and emotional competence, peer victimization and promoting conflict resolution strategies. Children learn that conflicts are victimization and to promote positive conflict respond to children's requests for help in dealing with victims (Peplar, Craig, Yuile, & Connolly, 2004) and bullying) because bullies are often themselves the conflicts are resolvable and that adults know how to help them. The WITS program offers a common WITS conceptual framework your WITS to
A manual for emergency service personnel tells school-based police liaisons, firefighters or paramedics how they can conduct the initiation ceremony and make monthly visits to the school. Student athletes from high schools and universities can also make school visits to ask children how they are doing with using their WITS. Age appropriate picture books that show children and adults using their WITS are listed and curriculum that was developed for use by teachers, librarians and counselors is accessible. The WITS manual also provides suggestions for multi-site activities that invite creativity and that can be adapted to the needs and interests of a particular families, schools, and communities. The WITS for “Siblings and Friends” pamphlet tells parents about peer conflict and how they can use the WITS program at home. For example, parents can use “WITS time outs” by suggesting that children “walk away and ignore the conflict” with siblings (to stop a conflict and to help children regulate their anger) and to come back when they are ready to “talk it out and get help” with solving the problem.

Table 1 WITS Program Components

1. **Teacher Curriculum**
   - Directs teachers to a wealth of early childhood literature and activities that can be used to reinforce WITS messages in the classroom. The curriculum addresses the learning outcomes required for elementary school curricula concerning social skills and responsibility, personal planning, language and visual arts, and drama.

2. **Emergency workers manual**
   - Walks police, firefighters or paramedics through the swearing-in-ceremony where kindergarten to grade 3 children are “deputized” as police helpers to keep their school safe and help other children. A stuffed walrus mascot (Witsup) is given to each school. WITS activity books, bookmarks, etc. are given to the children as reminders and to take these messages home.

3. **Library Curriculum**
   - Details curriculum and activities for a list of popular picture books. It also includes information that is central to a librarian’s curricula including effective literacy techniques used in the stories, vocabulary building, etc.

4. **University Athlete Curriculum**
   - Uses student athletes to provide positive role models from the community who advocate “using your WITS” in short visits to elementary school classrooms over the school year. The students are organized and supervised by a community liaison hired by the police group and are supported by the police officer assigned to the school.

5. **W.I.T.S for Siblings and Friends**
   - Guides parents in using WITS to resolve conflicts between siblings or children and their friends, using books and TV programs, to identify WITS strategies. Time outs prescribe “walking away” to think about good solutions to deal with problems.

Establishing this program in a school or school district requires a “champion” or “champions” to bring it forward (typically a school-based police officer, teacher, librarian, or school counselor) and some initial funding to ensure the books are accessible through the school library or in classrooms. It also requires support from school principals. Parent involvement in championing the program would likely also strengthen the implementation of the program. In our district, the program implementation was not sudden. Most frequently, it snow-balled class-by-class and school-by-school over time as support for the program gradually emerged among the adults in the child’s environment. This is characteristic of community development initiatives that bubble up from the enthusiasm of its supporters, given reasonable access to resources.

Evaluating Program Feasibility And Effectiveness

We have evaluated the feasibility and effectiveness of the WITS Primary Programs in a five-year longitudinal study involved elementary school students from 41 classrooms in 17 urban schools. Baseline data were collected at the start of grade 1 (fall of 2000) from 409 children (290 in program schools and 119 in control schools; 49% girls; mean age 6-years, 3-months). Follow-up data were collected at the ends of grade 1 (spring of 2001) from 400 children, grade 2 from 375 children, grade 3 from 363 children and at the end of grade 5 from 245 children.

As described in Leadbeater et al. (2003), we initially investigated whether classroom characteristics (average levels of social competence, emotional problems, and behavioral problems) and school-wide characteristics (proportion of children on income assistance and program versus control school) as experienced in grade 1, influenced changes in children’s reports of relational and physical victimization at the end of grade 2. Classroom levels of
relational victimization

program schools control schools

\[ \eta \]

physical victimization

program schools control schools

\[ \eta \]

high poverty program schools high poverty control schools

\[ \eta \]

In analyses of the longitudinal data, and as shown Figures 1 to 4, physical and relational victimization drop more in high poverty program schools compared to the high poverty control schools by the end of grade 3 (\( \bar{\beta}^2 = .02 \) for physical victimization and .06 for relational victimization). Fewer treatment group differences were found for the low poverty schools.

The formal evaluation of the program ended with the grade 3 wave of data and most of the control schools adopted the WITS program in some form by the next school year. At our follow up at the end of grade 5 of 245 children from the original sample showed that levels of victimization had dropped further in all schools.

The proportion of children who reported being victimized “sometimes” to “almost all the time” decreased noticeably from the start of grade 1 to end of grade 5 for both physical victimization (from 16.1% to 2.0%) and relational victimization (from 14.7% to 5.3%). While these results are encouraging, it is not possible to attribute this continued decrease to program effects, given both the absence of a control sample and the relatively high level of attrition. Rates at the end of grade 5 are also lower than what is usually reported in the literature. However, few studies have examined rates of physical and relational over this length of time. We have begun to develop the WITS LEADS2 program that is developmentally appropriate for children in grades 4, 5 and 6 and engages older students in the school community in helping others to use their WITS.

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2 LEADS stands for “Look and Listen,” “Explore points of View,” “Act,” “Did it work?” and “Seek Help”
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Schools and not in the control schools. The low to the only program consistently found in the program directly targeted peer victimization and WITS was our findings. However, none of these programs These additional programs could have influenced for dealing with excessively aggressive children. (primarily targeting the development of individual evaluation also had a variety of other programs about how to cope with peer victimization.

Consistent with other evaluations of this multi-component and multi-setting program in neighbourhood and classroom context. The developmental effect of a school-based violence prevention program in high poverty schools, perhaps suggesting the communities' acceptance of victimization through stopping victimization or by changing the "cultures" that surround them. Classroom, playground, school, home and neighborhood "cultures" can vary widely in their tolerance for aggression. While further research is clearly needed to unravel the effects of multi-level aggression. While further research is clearly needed to unravel the effects of multi-level cultures can vary widely in their tolerance for aggression. While further research is clearly needed to unravel the effects of multi-level

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moderate program effect sizes observed indicate that the WITS program holds promise for reducing victimization beyond programs focused on social competence and emotional and behavioral problems school, and classroom ecologies on changes in children's social competence and emotional and behavioral problems school, and classroom ecologies on changes in children's


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