

The Effectiveness of *Project Ploughshares Puppets for Peace* Anti-Bullying Program

Full Reference

Beran, T., & Shapiro, B. (2005). Evaluation of an anti-bullying program: Student reports of knowledge and confidence to manage bullying. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 28, 700-717.

Keywords

Bullying, peer aggression, program evaluation

Main Questions

Does the Project Ploughshares Puppets for Peace Program help to increase students' awareness of the types of bullying and strategies to manage them? Do students find the program helpful? Does viewing the puppet show sensitize students to their experiences and result in high rates of reporting victimization?

Background

Most schools now allocate some resources to managing bullying. Bullying is different from general aggression in that it is repetitive and is directed at a peer who is unable to defend him or herself. There are elements in a child's environment and biological make-up that may contribute to his or her experiences with bullying. For example, children who are victimized tend to be more anxious and isolated than children who are not victimized. These children tend to have higher levels of depression, passivity, and shyness. Children who bully others tend to show more anger, depression, and they tend to have less empathy toward others. Even the children who witness bullying are impacted and they tend to report feeling helpless and vulnerable when they see another child being bullied.

The effects of bullying on all children involved have implications for prevention programs. Children who are victimized tend to use ineffectual coping strategies. Thus, one component of school-based programs should include skills training for those children. In addition, children who witness bullying also need skills and support on how to intervene and help victimized children. Thus, the intention of the Project Ploughshares Puppets for Peace Program is to identify various types of bullying behaviors and strategies to manage it in order to increase student awareness of bullying.

Who Was Involved

The program is a 30-minute puppet show consisting of 4-foot hand and rod puppets that educates elementary school children about bullying and conflict resolution. Direct and indirect bullying situations are resolved using four main strategies (“4 footsteps” – ignoring, saying stop, walking away, getting help) that are modeled during the show and discussed at the end. Students in grades 3 and 4 (69 boys, 60 girls) from two urban Canadian public schools participated. Half of the children filled out identical questionnaires before and after seeing the puppet show and the other half filled out the questionnaires twice before seeing the puppet show to act as a comparison group. The questionnaire included questions about the various types of bullying (as well as aggressive but non-bullying behaviors), and positive, negative, and neutral strategies to manage bullying. Three months later, all 129 students (all of them had participated in the puppet show program) filled out the questionnaire again to determine the long-term effects of the program.

What We Found

Before the program, children were able to differentiate bullying from non-aggressive acts, but many students could not differentiate bullying from reciprocal aggression (where both children are behaving aggressively and neither child has more power than the other). More than half of the students were able to identify positive ways of managing bullying, including asking for help and saying stop. After the program, students were no better at differentiating bullying from reciprocal aggression, and they did not report using more positive anti-bullying strategies after the puppet show.

Students were also asked an open-ended question three months after the program, “Has the puppet show changed the way you think about or deal with bullying? Please tell how.” Responses varied, suggesting that students differ in their knowledge about bullying and how to manage it. A quarter of the students who responded with a “no” explained that they were either never bullied, and, therefore, did not need to deal with bullying, or they were knowledgeable about bullying and effective strategies before seeing the puppet show. This response may help to understand the lack of difference before and after the puppet show described earlier. Other students did report that the program helped them to feel more confident in their ability to deal effectively with bullying. This was particularly true for students who had never been bullied.

Following the puppet show, the students reported less victimization than they had reported prior to the show. This was contrary to what was expected. Thus, the show did not sensitize them to their experiences of victimization and increase their rate of reporting. Rather, it decreased perhaps because many of them felt reassured or

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confident in what to do about it. Victimization reports remained the same for the comparison group who filled out the survey twice, without viewing the puppet show in between. This result, suggests that students do provide consistent information in the absence of an intervention.

Overall, the program did not meet its intended goals of increasing awareness of types of bullying and strategies to manage it, perhaps because anti-bullying programs were already being implemented in these schools. Before the puppet show, children had a good understanding of bullying and strategies to manage it. However, responses to the open-ended question about how they were impacted by the show indicated that children felt encouraged to use the strategies they were already familiar with.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest that many teachers, administrators, and parents may be discussing bullying with children. Another possibility is that students were providing responses that they knew were "correct" or "socially desirable" rather than responses that reflected their actual behaviors. The baseline high awareness of students in this study reduced the possibility of increasing awareness through the puppet show because students were previously informed about bullying, resulting in a ceiling effect. This level of awareness among students today is important to consider when implementing and evaluating anti-bullying programs.

Students valued the confidence they developed through this program. However, only students who had never been bullied reported this increase in confidence. This program may be particularly beneficial for the group of students who witness bullying but are not directly involved. These students may gain enough confidence to intervene on behalf of the child being bullied, thus making a difference in the life of that victimized child. These results also provide insight into the possible reasons why children do not intervene; they are afraid, lack confidence, or do not understand how the victimized child is feeling (i.e., lack empathy). By understanding why children do not intervene, we are better able to educate children about how and why to get involved in creating a safe school climate.

Finally, this program did not succeed in teaching children how to differentiate between bullying and reciprocal aggression. It will be important for future program developers to clarify the differences between types of aggressive behaviour.