



# An investigation into the efficiency of empathy training program on preventing bullying in primary schools

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of empathy training as an intervention program on bullying exercised by six graders in primary schools. The study, carried out as a true experimental design, used two experiment groups and two control groups. The subjects were 38 students exercising bullying. The study used Child Form of Bully and Victim Determination Scale and Empathy Index for Children as data gathering tools. As data analysis tool, repeated measures of ANOVA was used to analyze time and intervention effects of empathetic skills and bullying behaviors of the participants. The study found that bullying behaviors of the participants in the experiment group decreased significantly when compared to the subjects in the control group. The study also found that the levels of emphatic skills of the participants in the experiment group increased significantly compared to the participants in the control group.

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## 1. Introduction

In the present study, the effectiveness of empathy training as an intervention program on bullying behaviors exercised by six graders in primary schools was investigated. The task was accomplished by using two experiment groups and two control groups in the form of a true experimental design. Much of literature on empathy among children and adolescents dwells on behavioral outputs of empathy. In some of these studies, participants' levels of empathy reveal a positive and supporting role on pro-social behaviors and social abilities (Barr & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2007; Heran, 2005). Still some others show a negative relationship between bullying, cyber bullying and violent behaviors (Ang & Goh, 2010; Munoz, Qualter, & Padgett, 2011; Nguyen, Clark, & Belgrave, 2011; Yeo, Ang, Loh, Fu, & Karre, 2011) and disruptive behaviors and crime-involvement (De Kemp, Overbeek, De Wied, Engels & Scholte, 2007; De Wied, Goudena, & Matthys, 2005; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007) and antisocial aptitudes (Schaffer, Clark, & Jeglic, 2009). Given the positive role of empathy on pro-social and other positive behaviors, researchers have also conducted many experimental studies on how to improve empathy among children and adolescents (Eslea & Smith, 1994; Heran, 2005; Kalliopuska & Ruokonen, 1993; O'Moore & Minton, 2005; Pecukonis, 1990). In these studies, it is reported that empathy training increase bullying behaviors and improve empathetic and social abilities. However, we can say that these experimental studies, both in number and in quality, are not sufficient and they do not cover the updated data.

Therefore, this experimental study intends to deal with the relationship between empathy training and decreasing bullying behaviors among school-children using some very updated data.

### 1.1. Bullying

Peer bullying, a subclass of aggressive behavior, is accepted as a universal concept although its definition may vary from one culture to another. Peer bullying is a problem especially in childhood, at the beginnings of puberty period and at school age. School bullying can be defined as senior and physically-well-built students' beating, harassing, and maltreating the ones weaker than them (Olweus, 1993). Swedish researcher Heinemann came up with the first definition of bullying attitudes as "mobbing" and took it as a sudden group violence against an individual (Dölek, 2001). But, much more longitudinal studies were launched by Dan Olweus in Scandinavian countries in 1970s (Eslea & Smith, 1994; O'Moore & Minton, 2005). Olweus (1994a, 1994b) defined peer bullying as the violence observed among peer groups, with no intention of provocation, willingly and deliberately made by the physically or psychologically stronger ones against others. He categorized peer bullying in two sections: direct and indirect aggressiveness. Direct attacks are insulting and humiliating actions which are physically or verbally carried out while indirect attacks are done by causing damage against victim's social status and sense of belonging. These definitions, Mynard and Joseph (2000) added the dimension of causing damage to personal belongings. The dimension of damaging personal belongings includes destroying and stealing the victim's belongings. In another study, peer bullying is undertaken as an attack against victim's racial origin, cultural values and personality (Verkuynen & Thijs, 1999). If the cultural and ethnic origins of victims are subjected to bullying, this

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is defined as “Group Peer Bullying”, if the personal characteristics of victims are subjected to bullying; this is called as “Personal Peer Bullying”.

### 1.2. Empathy

The term empathy has been defined in various ways throughout the history of science. According to some researchers, empathy is a basic cognitive function or the ability to be aware of the other's thoughts and feelings (Barnett, 1990; Borke, 1971). Some others define empathy as an affective reaction or ability to understand the other's feelings (Bernadett-Shapiro, Efreasaft, & Shapiro, 1996; Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Merrabian & Epstein, 1972). Still some others use both cognitive and affective aspects together successfully (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1990; Hoffman, 1982). Based upon the variety in definitions and a close research into literature, it can be said that the definition of the term “empathy” has three aspects. The first, which was widely used until the end of 1950s, is a cognitive one. In the 1960s, researchers emphasized another aspect of empathy: it was an affective function or reaction. Various studies have demonstrated that empathic ability can be used to inhibit or decrease aggressive and bullying behaviors (Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Richardson, Hommock, Smith, Gardner, & Manuel, 1994).

### 1.3. Empathy training

Empathy training has been an ongoing topic of discussion and an area of research since the 1960s. Whether the skill of empathic awareness is a learned skill or an innate one is a matter of discussion. According to Tanrıdağ (1992), empathy as an ability cannot be taught; however, the emphatic potential, which comes from birth, can be developed through training. Research has divided the techniques used in empathy training into four major categories: didactic, experiential, role-playing and modeling (Dalton, Sundbland, & Hylbert, 1973; Fine & Therrien, 1977; Gladstein & Feldstein, 1989; Greenberg & Goldman, 1988). Additionally, Eisenberg (1982) emphasized the important roles of social promotions, taking initiations, affective support from the social environment, reinforcement and ethical judgments in developing empathic attitudes among children.

### 1.4. Thesis statement

Based upon the suggestion made by recent research studies cited above that after taking empathy training children performing bullying behaviors can be equipped with the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with others, this study aimed to determine the effectiveness of empathy training as an intervention program on bullying behaviors exercised by six graders in primary schools. The study also targeted to improve the emphatic ability inherent in the nature of bullying children and help them turn into group existence healthily.

## 2. Method

The study used a true experimental design, a pretest for the experimental and control groups, post-test and a follow-up model.

### 2.1. Sampling

#### 2.1.1. Sampling was carried out in two stages

The first stage, after the administration of The Scale of Identifying Bully and Victim/Child Form on 1476 six graders in primary schools in Trabzon in the spring term of the 2009–2010 year, 82 students tended to exhibit bullying behaviors. Upon examining the points the bully students got from the scales, the ones showing extreme differentiation

were excluded. Thus, 61 students were identified as subjects. In the second stage, 38 of these 61 students were included in the study with a random selection.

### 2.2. Data gathering instruments

#### 2.2.1. The scale of identifying bullying/child form

The Scale of Identifying Bullying/ Child Form was developed by Pişkin and Ayas (2007). This scale included 37 items and 5 factors (physical, verbal, isolation, rumor and damaging belongings) in order to identify bullying. For the scale to be valid the researcher first consulted to an expert and then employed a confirming factor analysis. After the first level confirmatory factor analysis, it was found that adaptation indices were calculated as RMSEA = 0.046, GFI = 0.89, AGFI = 0.88, CFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.95 and NNFI = 0.96. After the second level confirmatory factor analysis, adaptation indices were found to be RMSEA = 0.049, GFI = 0.87, AGFI = 0.86, CFI = 0.96, NFI = 0.95 and NNFI = 0.96. Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient of Bully Scale was calculated for overall scale as 0.87; for “physical bullying” subscale as 0.71; for “verbal bullying” subscale as 0.68; for “isolation” subscale as 0.60; for “rumor” subscale as 0.64 and for “damaging belongings” subscale as 0.70. The study used the total scores gathered by the scale.

#### 2.2.2. The empathy index for children

This scale was developed by Bryant in 1982 and translated into Turkish by Yılmaz-Yüksel in 2003. In order to check the validity of the scale, a factor analysis and the principal component analysis were performed to find a one-factor solution. Scale consisted 20 items with a factor load of 245 or over. The reliability and coefficient of internal consistency of empathy scale for children were analyzed test-repeated test technique. The level of internal consistency of the Scale Cronbach Alpha Coefficient was calculated as .70. The level of the stability of the Scale was measured using Pearson moment correlation coefficient (PMCC) and found to be  $r = .69$  ( $p < .001$ ).

### 2.3. Data gathering process

Before starting to collect the required data, the schools constituting the sampling group were visited to take their consent to get them involved in the study. Then, the Scale of Identifying Bully/Child Form devised by Pişkin and Ayas (2007) was applied on 1476 six graders from all primary schools in the center of Trabzon. The application process was carried out by the researcher and the teachers in these schools. Only the students who were willing to participate in the study were given the questionnaire. Then, the students were informed of how to fill in the form. After having been filled, the forms were put in envelopes with the names of the schools. After analyzing the points each students got from the Scale of Identifying Bully/Child Form, 82 students were determined to exercise bullying behaviors on their peers. Then, these students were given the Empathy Index for Children devised by Yılmaz-Yüksel (2003). Upon examining the points these students got from upon examining the points the bully students got from the Scale of Identifying Bully/Child Form and the Empathy Index for Children, the ones showing extreme differentiation were excluded. Of 61 students whose scores were similar, 38 volunteer students were included in the study. To work with them efficiently, with a random selection the researcher got the students into four groups, two of 9 students and the other two of 10. The groups of 9 students were labeled as A and B groups, and put in another box. Again with a random selection, two groups of nine students were labeled as experimental group (B) and control group (A). Using the same method, the other two groups of ten students were labeled as experimental group (C) and control group (D). The experimental groups were given the empathy training program devised by the researcher himself in eleven sessions of 75-minute. Without being informed of the concept of the control group and the content of the study, the control groups were involved in

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