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Journal of School Psychology 48 (2010) 533–553

Journal of
**School
Psychology**

Supportive school climate and student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence

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Received 16 August 2009; received in revised form 12 July 2010; accepted 30 July 2010

Abstract

This study investigated the relations between student perceptions of support and student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence in a sample of 7318 ninth-grade students from 291 high schools who participated in the Virginia High School Safety Study. Hierarchical linear modeling indicated that students who perceived their teachers and other school staff to be supportive were more likely to endorse positive attitudes toward seeking help for bullying and threats of violence. In schools with more perceived support, there was less of a discrepancy in help-seeking attitudes between girls and boys. Findings suggest that efforts by school staff to provide a supportive climate are a potentially valuable strategy for engaging students in the prevention of bullying and threats of violence.

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Keywords: Help seeking; School climate; Bullying; School violence

Adolescents are often reluctant to seek help for bullying or threats of violence (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Studies document that as few as 25–30% of students who have been bullied report the incident to an authority figure and that only 11% of students are willing to seek help at school for personal problems (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Smith & Shu, 2000). Unnever and Cornell (2004) reported that students were especially reluctant to seek help when they regarded school staff as unconcerned with or tolerant of

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ACTION EDITOR: R. Floyd.

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bullying. Oliver and Candappa (2007) found that, as students grow older, they become increasingly reluctant to seek help for bullying from teachers or other adults. Multiple studies have called for more research on conditions that would promote help seeking in schools (Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Help seeking in schools is critical to the success of violence prevention programs because school staff cannot offer services or interventions if they are unaware that a student is being victimized (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Smith, Talamelli, & Cowie, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers often do not witness bullying or recognize it when they see it (Craig et al., 2000; Olweus, 1993). Accordingly, most bullying prevention programs stress the need for students to come forward when they experience bullying or observe bullying of their peers (Hazler & Carney, 2006; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Rigby, 1996).

Help seeking is a critical issue for ninth-grade students. Ninth grade is a year in which students are especially vulnerable to conflict, aggressive and disruptive behavior, and school disengagement (Donegan, 2008). In Virginia, ninth-grade students are responsible for 45% of all discipline infractions among students in grades 9–12 (Virginia Department of Education, 2005). Estell et al. (2007) found that aggressive behavior in ninth grade was related to poor grades and substance abuse. Academic achievement and social adjustment in ninth grade is also highly correlated with drop-out rates (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Ripple & Luthar, 2000). Roderick and Camburn (1996) found that 60% of students who dropped out of Chicago high schools had failed ninth grade. Among those students who spent more than 1 year as ninth graders, only 20% completed high school. In Neild et al.'s study of 2933 students in Philadelphia public schools, ninth-grade academic performance predicted high school drop-out, even after controlling for family income, parental education, and eighth-grade academic performance.

Researchers conventionally define bullying as a social interaction in which an individual or group subjects someone to repeated humiliation or intimidation that can include verbal abuse, physical violence, or social rejection (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Esbensen & Carson, 2009; Olweus, 1993). The aggressor must be stronger or in some way more powerful than the victim; conflict between equals is not considered bullying. A study using a nationally representative sample of 7182 students in grades 6–10 found a high prevalence of victimization at least once in the past two months, with approximately 13% of students reporting physical bullying, 37% verbal bullying, and 41% relational or social bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), although it should be noted that researchers caution that prevalence rates are highly influenced by definitional criteria (Esbensen & Carson, 2009). Disciplinary problems associated with bullying are a daily or at least weekly problem in 25% of U.S. public schools, according to the School Survey on Crime and Safety (Neiman, DeVoe, & Chandler, 2009).

Studies show that victims of bullying suffer from a range of serious consequences, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and increased risk for suicide (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Esbensen & Carson, 2009; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2003). Longitudinal studies have found that victimization is associated with poorer social and emotional adjustment (Esbensen & Carson, 2009), physical health problems (Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006), and increased incidence of anxiety disorders in young adulthood (Sourander et al., 2007).

Closely related to the experience of bullying is the experience of being threatened with violence. Bullies often make threats, and victims of bullying sometimes threaten physical

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