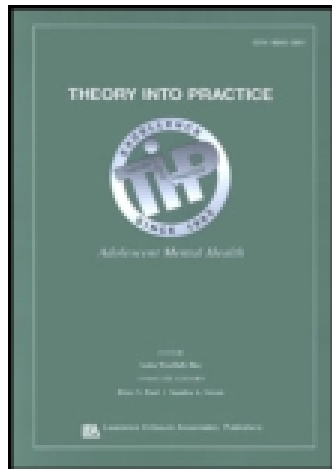


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Catherine P. Bradshaw

Preventing Bullying through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): A Multitiered Approach to Prevention and Integration

Although bullying continues to be a growing public health concern in schools across the United States, there are considerable gaps in the American understanding of effective prevention approaches for addressing this seemingly intractable issue. This article applies a public health approach to addressing bullying through the multitiered Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. After describing the connection between bullying, school climate, and positive approaches to behavior man-

agement, this article summarizes research on PBIS with regard to bullying, school climate, and student discipline. In addition to potentially influencing student behavior, PBIS also serves as a possible framework for integrating other evidence-based bullying and youth violence prevention models across the three tiers.

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BULLYING IS THE MOST common form of victimization experienced by school-aged children, and is an increasing public health concern (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Schools need guidance on which programs to implement, as well as strategies for integrating their bullying prevention work with other school improvement efforts within the school. A

multitiered support model called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006) holds promise as a framework for addressing issues related to bullying, as well as more general concerns related to school climate and student discipline problems. This article describes the PBIS framework and how it can be used to address issues related to bullying and school climate. We also consider zero-tolerance and other “misdirections” (stopbullying.gov) in bullying prevention. Gaps in the current research are highlighted and recommendations are made regarding the implementation of effective bullying and violence prevention programs.

PBIS

PBIS refers to a schoolwide application of behavioral systems and interventions to achieve behavior change in schools (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). PBIS is a noncurricular model, which means it is flexible to fit school culture and context; it can be implemented in any school level, type, or setting. It applies a three-tiered, public health systemwide framework (Walker et al., 1996) for implementing a continuum of behavioral and academic programs and services in which universal (Tier 1), selective (Tier 2), and indicated (Tier 3) systems promote outcomes for students. The universal elements of the model, typically referred to as schoolwide PBIS, are the most commonly implemented aspects of the three-tiered model. Currently, over 20,000 schools have participated in the implementation of the universal school-wide elements of PBIS (www.pbis.org).

The tiered PBIS model focuses on the academic, behavioral, and environmental context in which behavior problems occur. Applying PBIS, schools establish a set of positively-stated, schoolwide expectations for student behavior (e.g., “Be respectful, responsible, and ready to learn”), which was developed by each schools’ PBIS team and taught to all students and staff. A schoolwide system is then developed to reward students who exhibit the expected positive behaviors, often through the use of tangible rein-

forcers, such as tickets, parties, prizes, or special privileges like an opportunity to have lunch with a favorite teacher or administrator. PBIS aims to change adult behavior and the way adults interact with students to promote consistency across school contexts. There is a strong emphasis on schoolwide implementation that requires staff buy-in and is facilitated through a team-based process. Each school forms a PBIS team, comprised of school staff members, which is led by a PBIS Team Leader. A coaching process is used at the school, district, and state level to promote high fidelity implementation through ongoing progress monitoring. A district and state-level support team is also formed to provide training and technical assistance related to PBIS.

PBIS is a data-informed approach that emphasizes the collection of multiple data elements on both desired and problem behaviors to monitor implementation quality and program outcomes. The school’s PBIS team regularly reviews multiple data elements, such as office discipline referrals, and develops interventions accordingly for the whole school, groups of students, and/or individual students. The data are also used to determine if the interventions implemented for individual students or groups of students are producing effects (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Increasing evidence suggests that successful implementation of schoolwide or the universal (Tier 1) PBIS system is associated with sustainable changes in disciplinary practices and improved systems to promote positive behavior among students (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008; Horner et al., 2009). Two randomized controlled trials of schoolwide PBIS in elementary schools have shown that high quality implementation of the model is associated with significant reductions in office discipline referrals and suspensions and other problem behavior, such as teacher-ratings of classroom behavior problems, concentration problems, emotion regulation problems, as well as bullying perpetration and peer rejection (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Horner et al., 2009; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).

Significant improvements also have been documented on teachers' ratings of students' prosocial behavior, student reports of school climate, staff reports of the school's organizational health (e.g., principal leadership, teacher affiliation, and academic emphasis), teacher self-efficacy, and academic achievement (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008; Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, et al., 2012; Horner et al., 2009). Improvements in the schools' organizational context achieved through PBIS, in turn, may enhance the implementation quality of other, more intensive, preventive interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2009), and reduce the need for more intensive school-based services (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, et al., 2012). Another recent randomized controlled trial of PBIS was conducted in which the universal, schoolwide PBIS model was contrasted with the integration of selective preventive interventions and schoolwide PBIS; significant impacts were demonstrated on teacher efficacy, academic performance, and special education service use (Bradshaw, Pas, Goldweber, Rosenberg, & Leaf, 2012).

Applying PBIS to Bullying Prevention

Research documents the importance of schoolwide prevention efforts that provide positive behavior support, establish a common set of expectations for positive behavior across all school contexts, and involve all school staff in prevention activities (Ross & Horner, 2009). Effective supervision, especially in bullying hot spots, and clear antibullying policies are essential elements of a successful schoolwide prevention effort (Olweus et al., 2007). The ongoing data collection efforts through the PBIS framework can help identify where, when, and for whom behavior problems, like bullying, are occurring. Collecting data on bullying via anonymous student surveys can inform the supervision and intervention process. These data can identify potential areas for intensive training for school staff, which is an essential element of successful bullying prevention efforts (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009).

Data are also critical for monitoring progress toward the goal of reducing bullying (Olweus et al., 2007).

Families play a critical role in bullying prevention by providing emotional support to promote disclosure of bullying incidents and by fostering coping skills in their children. Through the PBIS framework, parents can receive training on supporting the home-school connection and setting consistent expectations for positive behavior across settings (Ross & Horner, 2009). There also are important bullying prevention activities that can occur at the community level, such as awareness or social marketing campaigns that encourage all youth and adults—including doctors, police officers, and storekeepers—to intervene when they see bullying and to become actively involved in school- and community-based prevention activities (Olweus et al., 2007).

In applying this framework to prevent bullying in schools, a tiered approach might include lessons on social-emotional skill development for all students—thus making it a universal program. In fact, research highlights the importance of providing class time to discuss bullying (Olweus et al., 2007) and the use of lessons to foster skills and competencies, effective communication, and strategies for responding to bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009); such strategies can also have a positive impact on academic and other behavioral outcomes. Effective classroom management is also critical, as well-managed classrooms are rated as having a more favorable climate, being safer and more supportive, and having lower rates of bullying. At the second tier, selective interventions may include social skills training for small groups of children at risk for becoming involved in bullying. Finally, an indicated preventive intervention (Tier 3) may include more intensive supports and programs tailored to meet the needs of students identified as a bully or victim, and the needs of their families (Ross & Horner, 2009). However, relatively few large-scale studies have been conducted examining the effects of multitiered programs on bullying, as much of the available research has aimed to address bullying at the

universal level. Nevertheless, several researchers have encouraged the use of a multitiered approach when aiming to prevent bullying and other forms of youth violence (e.g., Olweus et al., 2007; Waasdorp et al., 2012). As discussed in the following section, the tiered model is not only helpful for guiding the selection of the programs across the different levels, but it can also be useful in truly integrating the programs whereby common elements occur with varying levels of intensity and focus (Bradshaw, Bottiani, Osher, & Sugai, 2014; Domitrovich et al., 2010). Also see the description of the tiered approach by Vaillancourt, Hymel, and McDougall in this issue.

Rationale for Integrating Prevention Efforts through PBIS

It is important to consider how schools can integrate these and other bullying prevention efforts with their other existing programs and supports. Research by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) indicates that, on average, schools are using about 14 different strategies or programs to prevent violence and promote a safe learning environment. This can often be overwhelming for school staff to execute well, thereby leading to poor implementation fidelity. Therefore, schools are encouraged to integrate their prevention efforts so that there is a seamless system of support (Domitrovich et al., 2010), which is coordinated, monitored for high-fidelity implementation, and includes all staff members across all school contexts. Instead of adopting a different program to combat each new problem that emerges, it is recommended that schools develop a consistent and long-term prevention plan that addresses multiple student concerns through a set of well-integrated programs and services. Such efforts would address multiple competencies and skills to prevent bullying, and help students cope and respond appropriately when bullying does occur. The three-tiered public health model provides a framework for connecting bullying prevention with other programs to address bullying within the broader set of

behavioral and academic concerns (Walker et al., 1996).

As described, PBIS provides a framework for the integration of programs and services. Students whose needs are not fully met by a universal bullying prevention program or a universal system of positive behavior support (Sugai & Horner, 2006) would require targeted and/or individually tailored preventive interventions based on a systematic assessment of their needs (Walker et al., 1996). Like other tiered prevention models, such as response to intervention, PBIS emphasizes data-based decision-making, continuous progress monitoring, a continuum of evidence-based interventions, and monitoring of implementation fidelity. Through review of data at the child, classroom, or school level, other more intensive evidence-based practices can be selected to meet the needs of the target population. The PBIS framework provides an opportunity for integration of programs to meet a range of student social and emotional learning needs. By using a common language, logic, and structure, as well as the existing systems established through the schoolwide PBIS framework to implement the other complementary evidence-based practices, the integrated model may result in more sustainable changes in the school environment and optimize outcomes for the student (Domitrovich et al., 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

The organizational framework offered by PBIS may help encourage sustained implementation of bullying prevention programs settings (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2009). For example, PBIS can provide a schoolwide context in which the skills can be taught, practiced, and reinforced throughout the day. Moreover, by improving schoolwide climate and behavior management practices across school settings, PBIS may enhance the implementation quality and effects of classroom-based bullying prevention efforts (Domitrovich et al., 2010). Furthermore, PBIS has been shown to increase the amount of instructional time available to teachers, which makes it more likely that teachers will have the class time to administer classroom-based programs as intended.

Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools (MDS3) Initiative: A Case Example of Bullying Prevention Through PBIS

A statewide collaboration in Maryland recently partnered on an integrated implementation of PBIS in a 58-school randomized controlled trial of PBIS when combined with evidence-based prevention programs. This 13-million dollar trial was funded through the US Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative and aimed to develop and administer a statewide Web-based measurement system to assess multiple aspects of school climate (e.g., school safety, student engagement, and the school environment), as reported by students, parents, and school staff members. Half of the schools were randomly assigned to the PBIS intervention condition, in which they receive training in the PBIS model and the use of the school climate data to determine the need for tailored evidence-based preventive interventions. The intervention schools receive training, coaching, and the necessary resources to implement a continuum (e.g., universal, selective, and indicated) of evidence-based practices. The intervention schools were provided coaching support in the review of their school climate data and the selection and implementation of prevention programs, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus et al., 2007), LifeSkills Training for High Schools, Check-In/Check-Out, Check & Connect, and Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS); these programs were then integrated within the PBIS framework. The comparison high schools will be monitored over a period of three years using this same climate measure and will receive training at the end of the trial. We are also determining the impact of PBIS on classroom and non-classroom observations of setting-level factors (e.g., safety and classroom climate). This will enable us to examine potential setting-level moderators of program impacts and predictors of intervention fidelity, and to explore the relationship between perceptions of school climate and setting-level measures of school climate.

A number of lessons have been learned from the integration, including the importance of principal leadership, buy-in from school staff, and having dynamic school-based coaches who can leverage change. Much of the first 2 years of the implementation process focused on building the foundations and systems to support implementation across the three tiers. The most commonly selected evidence-based programs were Check & Connect, Olweus Bullying Prevention, and CBITS. The preliminary results from the trial suggest some positive impacts of the integrated PBIS model on school climate. The findings from the MDS3 Project will inform the understanding of the impact of schoolwide preventive interventions in high schools, and factors influencing implementation fidelity and the outcomes of those programs. This research also has important implications for Maryland's Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative in terms of validating the state's new MDS3 School Climate Survey in relation to the observational data.

Nonrecommended Approaches to Bullying Prevention

Given the complex nature of bullying, there are some strategies that have been shown to be ineffective or potentially harmful for students. One of these approaches is youth- or peer-facilitated programs, such as peer mediation, peer-led conflict resolution, and peer mentoring. In fact, research by Farrington and Ttofi (2009) indicated that many programs that used these peer-facilitated approaches actually resulted in increases in victimization. Moreover, studies on youth violence and delinquency prevention (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006) suggest that grouping children who bully together may actually reinforce their aggressive behaviors and result in higher rates of bullying. In these contexts, a contagion process occurs, whereby the bullies learn from each other and are reinforced for their aggressive behavior. Furthermore, conflict resolution and restorative justice approaches, even when facilitated by adults, are not typically recommended in situations of bullying,

as they suggest a disagreement between two peers of equal status or power, rather than an instance of peer abuse. These approaches also typically bring targets and youth who bully face-to-face, which may be especially hurtful for the victim. It is important to note, however, that there may be other forms of delinquent and problem behavior, such as property offenses or threats toward staff members, which may be more appropriate for these types of conflict resolution approaches. Nevertheless, additional research is certainly needed to determine their appropriateness for different types of aggressive and problem behavior, and more broadly on the role of youth in preventing bullying. It is critical to involve youth in programming and to identify leadership roles for them. It is likely that structured and well-supervised youth leadership activities can have a positive impact on bullying; however, there need to be more rigorous studies that document outcomes associated with these approaches.

There is also little evidence that brief assemblies or one-day awareness raising events are sufficient for changing a climate of bullying or producing sustainable effects on bullying behavior (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Sadly, some such assemblies and awareness-raising efforts have focused heavily on instances of youth suicides, which may have been linked in some way with bullying. Given growing concerns about the potential association between bullying and youth suicide, and more generally issues related to suicidal contagion among adolescents (Romer, Jamieson, & Jamieson, 2006), practitioners and researchers should be cautious in highlighting such a potential link, as it may result in confusion and misattribution among families, as well as the media. Rather, it is critical to state the epidemiology evidence that suicide is extremely complex, and generally associated more directly with mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression. Bullying could, therefore, serve as a risk factor for youth who are also experiencing mental health concerns (Klomek et al., 2011). This underscores the importance of multicomponent programs that address social, behavioral, and mental health concerns.

Finally, zero-tolerance policies, which mandate suspensions for children who bully, have traditionally been a common response to bullying and other forms of school violence (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008; Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011). Although ensuring the safety of the victim is paramount, and a consistent discipline procedure is strongly recommended (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009), zero-tolerance policies may result in underreporting of bullying incidents because they are perceived as too harsh or punitive. Furthermore, there is limited evidence that they are effective in curbing aggressive or bullying behavior (APA, 2008; Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011), as many children who bully may, themselves, be victims and may have other behavioral, social, or emotional problems requiring intervention (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009; Swearer et al., 2010). Therefore, schools and districts should be cautious in the use of these exclusionary approaches, as they may do more harm than good.

Conclusions

The social-ecological framework says that poor school climate is associated with increased bullying and negative student outcomes. In contrast, positive, schoolwide approaches to student behavior management have been shown to improve school climate and will, in turn, likely reduce bullying. Consequently, these proactive positive approaches should be used as an alternative to punitive approaches. The available research suggests that PBIS is a promising approach for addressing issues related to student discipline, school climate, and bullying. The multitiered public health approach also serves as a viable framework for organizing the simultaneous and integrated implementation of evidence-based programs across the three tiers. Yet, the process of integration can often be much easier said than done, as educators may encounter some challenges integrating team-led efforts, such as PBIS and Olweus, without overloading and exceeding the team's resources. But through careful alignment of goals, activities, and leadership

efforts, we anticipate that bullying prevention programs can be implemented and synergized through the PBIS framework without compromising the integrity of either model. Such an approach is consistent not only with the public health framework, but also with the predominate models in prevention science, that place emphasis on translating research to practice and optimizing quality implementation of evidence-based approaches. Although there is a clear need for additional research on multiple aspects of bullying prevention, including what to do and what not to do, the application of the PBIS framework holds great promise for advancing our understanding of effective approaches to bullying prevention.

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