Using Social Norms to Reduce Bullying: A Research Intervention Among Adolescents in Five Middle Schools

SUMMARY: Bullying is a serious problem among youth, particularly in schools, and increases risk for a number of negative outcomes. Behaviors and attitudes regarding bullying were compared before and after anti-bullying campaigns, which aimed to dispel misperceptions about high bullying prevalence and acceptance among middle school youth. Overall, anti-bullying campaigns may be effective in changing perceptions of peer norms, which strongly impact youth's own behaviors and attitudes about bullying.

KEY FINDINGS:

- At baseline, students perceived bullying perpetration prevalence among peers to be three to four times more common than actual reported bullying perpetration.
- Self-reported bullying perpetration behaviors were greater among youth who perceived bullying perpetration as more prevalent and more accepted among peers.
- Among most schools, perceptions and self-reported rates of bullying, victimization, and pro-bullying attitudes significantly decreased following the intervention.
- The more exposure youth had to anti-bullying messages dispelling misperceptions about bullying acceptance and prevalence, the more their own behaviors and attitudes improved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:
- Help develop anti-bullying materials (e.g., posters, flyers, presentations) for military schools
- Facilitate support groups for military youth experiencing bullying victimization

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:
- Offer workshops for military youth that provide information about bullying and victimization, ways to stop bullying among peers, and discussions about peers' bullying norms
- Provide anti-bullying informational handouts to all youth in existing military programs

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:
- Encourage collaboration between Department of Defense programs and community schools to organize frequent anti-bullying campaigns across both community and military schools
- Recommend professional development for community educators about the unique concerns and needs of military youth who are experiencing bullying victimization

REACH

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METHODS

- Middle school students were recruited from five New Jersey schools which implemented an anti-bullying campaign; the response rate across schools was 59%.
- Students completed pre- and post-intervention surveys regarding their own and perceptions of others' bullying perpetration, victimization, and pro-bullying attitudes.
- Bullying behaviors and attitudes were compared before and after the anti-bullying intervention.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 2,589 students (M = 12.7 years, 54% female) surveyed pre-intervention and 3,024 students (M = 12.4 years, 53% female) surveyed post-intervention.
- All students were in grades six through eight.
- The majority of students identified as White in the pre-intervention (64%) and post-intervention (61%) samples.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants may have differed from non-participants, and those who participated pre- and post-intervention may have differed as well, particularly on bullying behaviors and attitudes.
- Students may have responded in the most socially desirable way possible, biasing results.
- Without a control group, it cannot be concluded that the anti-bullying campaigns caused the changes in bullying attitudes and behaviors among students.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:
- Explore the relationship between media disproportionately focusing on problem behaviors among youth and youth misperceptions about peer norms regarding problem behaviors
- Compare whether messages emphasizing positive behaviors (e.g., helping others) or stopping negative behaviors (e.g., not bullying) are more effective in changing youth behavior
- Investigate differences in bullying behaviors and norms between different demographic groups (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status)

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design
★★☆
Appropriate
Research Plan
and Sample

Methods
★★☆
Appropriate
Measurement
and Analysis

Limitations
★★☆
Few

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
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