

II. Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

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Background and Introduction

Bullying is recognized as an urgent public health issue and remains prevalent in schools around the world. It is a complex form of peer abuse that has potentially serious social, physical and mental health consequences for children and adolescents¹. Efforts to best address the issue have been led by the foundational research of Dr. Dan Olweus².

The definition of bullying created by Olweus, pioneer researcher of bullying, has been used for decades and has been widely accepted by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners³. According to Olweus, "A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself"⁴. Expressed a bit differently, bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*, USA, Washington, D.C., The National Academies Press, 2016; American Medical Association, *Report 1 of the Council on Scientific Affairs: Bullying behaviors among children and adolescents*, Retrieved, USA, August 11, 2004, <http://www.ama-assn.org>.

² Green, J. G., Furlong, M. J., and Felix, E. D., "Defining and measuring bullying across the life course", in Bradshaw, C. P. (Ed.), *Handbook on Bullying Prevention: A Life Course Perspective*, USA, Washington, D.C., NASW Press, 2017, pp. 7-20.

³ Gladden, R.M., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Hamburger, M.E. *et al.*, *Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0.*, USA, Atlanta, G.A., National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Education, 2014.

⁴ Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Teacher Guide*, USA, Center City, MN, Hazelden, 2007; Olweus, D., Limber, S. P., Flerx, V. *et al.*, *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Schoolwide Guide*, USA, Center City, MN, Hazelden, 2007.

mean and hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself.

Three key components of bullying are:

- Bullying is aggressive behavior.
- Bullying is usually repeated.
- Bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength.

Bullying may occur in person or indirectly, including through electronic means (cyberbullying). It can be direct in the form of verbal or physical bullying; it can also be indirect behavior such as spreading rumors or excluding someone from a group⁵.

Although bullying may not be as overtly threatening as the use of weapons, it occurs with greater frequency and has a profound impact on a student's emotional health and school performance.⁶ Bullying is associated with both short-term and long-term consequences for the student who bullies others, the student who is being bullied, and the bystanders who see or know it is happening. Research shows that children who are bullied experience lower self-esteem and higher rates of health problems, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. They can also experience withdrawal, aggression, and feelings of rejection⁷.

Children who bully others are at a higher risk for alcoholism, substance abuse, antisocial personality disorders, and externalizing problems such as violence and delinquency, compared with peers who do not bully⁸. Bystanders who observe bullying behavior without intervention may develop a decreased sense of individual responsibility⁹ or experience fear

⁵ *Idem*.

⁶ Dupper, D.R. and Adams, N.M., "Low-level violence: A neglected aspect of school culture", *Urban Education*, vol. 37, núm. 3, May, 2002, pp. 350-364; Vaillancourt, T., Sanderson, C. Arnold, P. McDougall, P., "The neurobiology of peer victimization: Longitudinal links to health, genetic risk, and epigenetic mechanisms", in Bradshaw, C. P. (Ed), *Handbook on Bullying Prevention: A Life Course Perspective*, USA, Washington, D.C., NASW Press, 2017.

⁷ Urbanski, J. and Permuth, S., *The Truth about Bullying: What Educators and Parents Must Know and Do*, USA, Rowman Littlefield Publication, 2009.

⁸ Indiana Department of Education, *White paper on bullying prevention and education*, USA, December 31, 2003. Retrieved June 30, 2006 from: <http://www.doe.state.in.us/le-gwatch/docs/Bullyingpaper2004session.doc>.

⁹ Olweus, D., *Bullying at School. What We Know and What We Can Do*, UK, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993.

of retaliation if they get involved¹⁰. They may have a heightened sense of anger, helplessness, and guilt for not taking action. These negative consequences described for involved students can continue into adulthood.

Bullying can also contribute to a negative school climate which is associated with greater aggression and victimization¹¹. In environments where bullying is not addressed, students may feel unsafe, making it both physically and emotionally harder for them to learn. In contrast, a climate of safety, respect, and emotional support in schools not only helps to diminish the possibility of targeted violence in schools, but can also impact academic achievement as well¹².

The *United Nations' Study on Violence against Children* recognized that bullying is a global concern that can interfere with a child's right to an education and negatively impact his or her health and emotional well-being¹³. The Study recommended the use of specific programs which address the whole school climate, including the implementation of anti-bullying policies and the promotion of respect for all members of the school community. Mexico played a key role in furthering the United Nations' (UN) global agenda for child welfare by proposing a resolution to protect children and adolescents from bullying, and in November, 2014, the resolution was adopted by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly¹⁴.

An effective way for schools to decrease problems associated with bullying behavior is to implement an evidence-based program that supports the development of a positive climate reducing the likelihood of all types of bullying. As the world's original and best-known bullying prevention initiative, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is such a program. It is listed on the Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, *Preventing Bullying: A Manual for Schools and Communities*, USA, Washington, D.C., Department of Education, 1998.

¹¹ Goldweber, A., Waasdorp, T.E., and Bradshaw, C.P., "Examining the link between forms of bullying behaviors and perceptions of safety and belonging among secondary school students", *Journal of School Psychology*, vol. 51, núm. 4, 2013, pp. 469-485.

¹² Fein, R. A., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W.S. et al., *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing situations and to creating safe school climates*, USA, Washington D.C., U. S. Secret Service and U.S., Department of Education, May, 2002.

¹³ United Nations, *United Nations study on violence against children*, 2006. Retrieved December 5, 2017 from: http://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/reports/SG_violencestudy_en.pdf.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Office for Human Rights and Democracy 82", *Boletín informativo: The policy of human rights in Mexico*, December 3, 2014. Retrieved January 9, 2018 from: <https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/dinamarca/images/pdf/bullying.pdf>.

Registry of Evidence-based Positive Youth Development Programs.¹⁵With over thirty-five years of research and successful implementation around the world, *OBPP* is a whole-school program that has been proven to prevent or reduce bullying throughout a school setting.

The *OBPP* has been implemented in more than a dozen countries around the world and in thousands of schools in the United States. Clemson University in South Carolina, U.S., serves as the center of *OBPP* training and consultation for all of North, Central, and South America. Approximately 85 Olweus Trainer Certification Courses have been conducted in the United States since 2001, and there are currently about 1500 active Trainer-Consultants, including several in Mexico and South America.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

The *OBPP* is a comprehensive, school-wide approach focused on systemic change to create a safe and positive school climate. It is designed to reduce and prevent bullying in elementary, middle, and high schools. The goals of the *OBPP* are to reduce existing bullying problems among students, prevent new bullying problems, and achieve better peer relations. These goals are pursued by restructuring the school environment to reduce opportunities and rewards for bullying, encouraging pro-social behaviors, and building a sense of community¹⁶.

The Olweus Program incorporates what researchers and practitioners have identified as best practices in bullying prevention and intervention.¹⁷ One such practice is that bullying prevention is most effective when it happens on multiple levels¹⁸. The *OBPP* does this by implementing bullying prevention strategies in all areas in the school, and by focusing on effective interventions when bullying problems arise. The program involves all staff, students, caregivers, and the community in bullying prevention

¹⁵ Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, <http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/factsheet/olweus-bullying-prevention-program>.

¹⁶ Olweus, D. and Limber, S.P., "Five key components in a global strategy against bullying. In Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children", in *Ending the Torment: Tackling Bullying from the Schoolyard to Cyberspace*, USA, New York: United Nations Publications, 2016, pp. 67-73.

¹⁷ Limber, S. P. and Snyder, M., "What works and doesn't work in bullying prevention and intervention", *The State Education Standard*, 2006, pp. 24-28.

¹⁸ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, *Preventing Bullying Through...*, *op. cit.*

efforts. All students participate in most aspects of the program, while students who bully others and students who are bullied receive additional individualized interventions.

The OBPP is based on four basic principles, derived from research on reducing aggressive behavior¹⁹. Adults in school need to:

- Show warmth, positive interest, and involvement.
- Set firm limits for unacceptable behavior.
- Consistently use supportive, predictable consequences when unacceptable behavior occurs.
- Act as authorities and positive role models.

These principles have been translated to a number of strategies that are implemented at the school-wide, classroom, individual, and community levels and include tools to reach out to families for involvement and support. These strategies, described in *What Works-and Doesn't Work-in Bullying Prevention and Intervention*²⁰, will now be described in more detail.

Focus on the whole school environment: The OBPP is a comprehensive, school-wide program that involves the entire school community. To reduce bullying, it is important to change the environment and social norms of the school with regard to bullying. It must become normative for staff and students to notice and respond when a child is bullied or left out. Since bullying is not the sole responsibility of any single individual at a school, it requires buy-in and efforts of everyone in the school setting—teachers, administrators, counselors, other non-teaching staff (such as bus drivers, nurses, school resource officers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and school librarians), families, and students²¹.

Assess bullying at school: The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (OBQ) is an anonymous research-based survey administered to students that assesses the nature, extent, and location of bullying problems in a school²².

¹⁹ Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., *Olweus Bullying Prevention...*, *op. cit.*; Olweus, D., Limber, S. P., Flerx, V. et al., *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Schoolwide Guide...*, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Limber, S. P. and Snyder, M., "What works and doesn't work...", *op. cit.*

²¹ Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., *Olweus Bullying Prevention...*, *op. cit.*; Olweus, D., Limber, S. P., Flerx, V. et al., *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Schoolwide Guide...*, *op. cit.*

²² *Idem*.

Adults are not always accurate in estimating the prevalence of bullying at their school and are frequently surprised by the amount of bullying that students experience, the types of bullying that are most common, or the “hot spots” where bullying happens. The OBQ usually takes approximately 30–40 minutes to complete for most students in grades 3 and higher. The student data is provided to the school in a report containing user-friendly graphs depicting results in their own school. This information provides heightened awareness to adults in the school community, aids staff in planning their implementation, and often leads to increased staff engagement in bullying prevention efforts. Surveying students annually is recommended to determine program effectiveness and areas for continued attention²³.

Form a group to support bullying prevention activities: The Olweus Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee (BPCC) is a representative group from the school that includes an administrator, a teacher from each grade, a member of the non-teaching staff, a school counselor or other school-based mental health professional, a parent or caregiver, and a community representative to serve as the leadership team for program implementation at the school. This bullying prevention leadership team undergoes a comprehensive, highly organized two-day training by a Certified Olweus Trainer-Consultant. The team then meets at least monthly to plan and coordinate bullying prevention activities, train and motivate staff, students, and families, and ensure that efforts continue over time. Additional tasks of the BPCC include administering the questionnaire and evaluating and disseminating the results, as well as representing the program to families, the community, and the media²⁴.

Train all staff in bullying prevention: As stated above, the leadership team (BPCC) ensures that administrators, faculty, and all other staff are adequately trained to understand the nature of bullying and its effects, how to respond if they observe bullying, and how to work with others at the school to help prevent bullying from occurring. Every adult should receive clear guidance about how to identify bullying and opportunities to role play intervening in bullying situations. Initially, staff participate in six hours of training. Ongoing professional development is provided through monthly staff discussion groups. Regularly scheduled staff discussion groups include all staff, keep bullying prevention and intervention efforts central to school climate improvement, help build staff skills, and support program

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ *Idem.*

engagement. Refresher training is offered annually and newly hired staff are provided training at the start of their employment²⁵.

Establish and enforce school rules and policies related to bullying:

The OBPP recommends that schools adopt four straightforward rules about bullying:

- We will not bully others.
- We will try to help students who are bullied.
- We will try to include students who are left out.
- If we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

Rules are taught to students and are posted throughout the school in classrooms, hallways, and all other places where students gather. The rules are designed to cover the various forms of bullying and provide guidance about how to respond when bullying is experienced, witnessed, or suspected. They establish a consistent set of behavioral expectations, making it clear to students and families that there is a unified approach against bullying in the school. These rules should be incorporated into school behavior and disciplinary policies. Appropriate methods of positive reinforcement and developmentally appropriate corrective consequences are established to ensure that students are aware of adult expectations that they refrain from bullying and help students who are bullied²⁶.

Involve children in regular discussions about bullying: Allow for student voice in bullying prevention to engage children and youth as active partners in creating and maintaining a safe and humane school climate. Regular class meetings, or student circle discussions, are a core component of the OBPP classroom activities. Teachers (with the support of administrators) should set aside class time each week (or every other week for high schools) to discuss bullying, peer relations, and other social and emotional issues with students. These meetings help teachers keep their fingers on the pulse of students' concerns, foster mutually respectful relationships between adults and children and among peers, and provide tools for students to address bullying and other social problems. Meetings may

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ *Idem.*

last between 20-40 minutes depending on the students' age. They offer the opportunity to build a sense of community and belonging in the classroom and develop student norms about bullying and other important social issues. A student advisory group can also be formed to focus on bullying prevention and provide valuable feedback to adults²⁷.

Increase adult supervision in locations where bullying occurs: The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire provides information to help schools identify hot spots where bullying occurs, allowing the BPCC to refine the school's supervisory system so bullying is less likely. "Bullying tends to thrive in locations where adults are not present or are not vigilant"²⁸. Once bullying hot spots have been identified, the BPCC reviews and coordinates ways to increase adult presence in these locations. All adults are responsible for supervising all children in the school, and careful supervision should occur at all times²⁹.

Intervene consistently and appropriately in bullying situations: The OBPP encourages staff to intervene when bullying is witnessed, suspected, or reported, and provides training so all staff are well prepared to intervene when necessary. The six-step on-the-spot intervention guides staff in what to do if they witness bullying first-hand. Follow-up discussions provide opportunities for students, staff, and caregivers (as appropriate) to engage in deeper conversations about the bullying incident to develop solutions for student safety and positive growth. Individual plans can be developed to tailor efforts for each involved student to make certain that the situation is being appropriately addressed, ensuring both physical and emotional safety for all³⁰.

Garner family support for bullying prevention: The comprehensive components of the OBPP include resources that encourage parental and family involvement from the planning stages through implementation. Parents and families need to hear that the school is concerned, aware, and actively working to stop the bullying. They are an integral part of school-wide efforts, classroom activities, and in individual bullying situations involving their child. Meetings and ongoing communication strengthen home-school connection while building support for program implementation. The OBPP

²⁷ *Idem*.

²⁸ Limber, S. P. and Snyder, M., "What works and doesn't work...", *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁹ Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., *Olweus Bullying Prevention...*, *op. cit.*; Olweus, D., Limber, S. P., Flerx, V. et al., *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Schoolwide Guide...*, *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Idem*.

provides resources to share with families so they are prepared to support the school's efforts, which is essential for program success³¹.

Provide ongoing support: OBPP implementation is a highly supported process created by a multi-layered system of consultation. School-based leadership teams receive ongoing assistance from a Certified Trainer-Consultant. This OBPP representative, in turn, receives mentoring support from the program's United States home-base at Clemson University's Safe and Humane Schools through consultation with an Olweus Technical Assistance Consultant (OTAC). This tiered support structure along with materials developed by the OBPP provide schools with everything needed to implement the program with fidelity.

Engage the broader community: Bullying in the community can affect students at school. Therefore, developing community support is a core component of the *OBPP* so students receive consistent anti-bullying messages in all areas of their lives. School leadership teams may develop partnerships with community members or organizations to support prevention efforts. They may involve community members on the BPCC. Schools and students can benefit from community help in spreading anti-bullying messages and best practices throughout their cities and neighborhoods³². Because *OBPP* is a framework, its core components and supportive materials can also be used in non-school settings that children and youth attend on a regular basis, such as after-school programs, camps, and sports leagues. A *Community Youth Organization Guide* provides youth-serving organizations with practical strategies to prevent bullying, reduce incidents of bullying, and enrich peer relationships in these out-of-school settings³³.

Continue efforts over time: Successful bullying prevention requires a long-term commitment. The Olweus Program provides a framework for creating systemic change to build a school climate that discourages bullying and addresses it effectively if it occurs. Attitudes and norms in a school setting don't change overnight, but they can and will shift over time. There should be no end date for bullying prevention. It requires continuous attention and should be woven into the entire school environment to become a daily part of school life. The OBPP can be successfully integrated

³¹ Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., *Olweus Bullying Prevention...*, op. cit.; Olweus, D., Limber, S. P., Flerx, V. et al., *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Schoolwide Guide...*, op. cit.

³² *Idem*.

³³ Snyder, M., Riese, J., Limber, S. P., Olweus, D. Et al., *Community Youth Organization Guide*, USA, Center City, MN, Hazelden, 2014.

with other universal prevention efforts to create safe and humane school communities³⁴.

Research

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is backed by more than 35 years of research and has proven to reduce bullying, improve classroom social climate, and reduce related antisocial behaviors.

To date, seven large-scale evaluations of the OBPP have been carried out in Norway, involving more than 30,000 students from more than 300 schools³⁵. Results of the first evaluation of the OBPP conducted in Bergen, Norway showed marked reductions in students' self-reports of being bullied and bullying others, and significant reductions in teachers' and students' ratings of bullying among students within the classroom³⁶. In addition, there were significant improvements in school climate measures³⁷.

More recently, results from a large scale study of the OBPP in the United States involving more than 200 Pennsylvania schools and over 70,000 students support the effectiveness of the OBPP. The study found reductions in being bullied, bullying others, and willingness to join in bullying, as well as increases in students' empathy with bullied peers and increases in students' perceptions that their primary teacher had increased his or her efforts to address bullying³⁸.

Overall, studies of the OBPP have found consistently positive program effects. Outcomes include:

³⁴ Limber, S. P. and Snyder, M., "What works and doesn't work...", *op. cit.*

³⁵ Olweus, D., "A useful evaluation design, and effects of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program", *Psychology, Crime & Law*, núm. 11, 2005, pp. 389-402; Olweus, D. and Limber, S. P., "The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: Implementation and evaluation over two decades", in Jimerson, S. R., Swearer, S. M., and Espelage, D. L. (Eds.), *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*, USA, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 377-401; Olweus, D., and Limber, S. P., "Bullying in school: Evaluation and dissemination of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, núm. 80, 2010, pp. 124-134.

³⁶ Olweus, D., "Bully/victim problems in school: Facts and intervention", *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, núm. 12, 1997, pp. 495-510.

³⁷ Olweus, D., and Limber, S. P., "Bullying in school: Evaluation and dissemination...", *op. cit.*

³⁸ Limber, S.P., Olweus, D., Wang, W. *et al.*, *Evaluation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: A Large Scale Study of U.S. Students in Grades 3-11*, Manuscript under review, 2018.

- Reductions of 20% to 70% in reports of students being bullied and bullying others.
- Marked reductions of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy among students.
- Clear improvements in classroom social climate, as reflected in reports of improved order and discipline, more positive social relationships, and more positive attitudes toward schoolwork and school among students.

Additionally, meta-analyses by Ttofi & Farrington (2011) are widely recognized as the most comprehensive and rigorous meta-analyses on bullying prevention programs. They found that whole-school programs can be successful in reducing bullying but there are great variations in the effects of different programs. Their analysis concluded that programs “inspired by the work of Dan Olweus worked best”³⁹.

OBPP in Mexico

The National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH) estimates that 40% of all Mexicans in elementary schools (public and private) are victims of bullying⁴⁰. Yet measuring violence in Mexican schools is a fairly recent practice⁴¹ and laws against bullying are limited. Currently only five Mexican states have legislation in place, with wide variance by state and school. The authors noted a common element in these laws is the need for prevention and intervention programming and actions.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program provides a framework for schools in states with laws as well as those looking for evidence based guidance to address bullying at schools. In addition to the certified Olweus Trainer-Consultants already doing this work in Mexico, there is ongoing interest in several regions of Mexico to conduct large-scale implementations of the OBPP. With Spanish translation of training and program materials available, Mexico could be the first country in Clemson University's OBPP

³⁹ Ttofi, M. M. and Farrington, D. P., “Effectiveness of school-based programs to reduce bullying: A systematic and meta-analytic review”, *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, vol. 7, núm. 1, 2011, pp. 27-56.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 41-42.

⁴¹ A., Wall-Medrano, A., Esparza-Del Villar, O. *et al.*, “Design and validation of a self-administered test to assess bullying (bull-M) in high school Mexicans: A pilot study”, *BMC Public Health*, vol. 13, núm. 334, 2013.

territory outside of the United States to host an Olweus Trainer Certification Course, building on the good work of existing OBPP Trainer-Consultants. As stated by Emma Tinoco Estrada, National Coordinator of Middle Schools at Tecnológico de Monterrey and Olweus Technical Assistance Consultant⁴²:

“The OBPP has been, in my experience, a fundamental part of our schools to build a culture of respect, support and solidarity among peers and which places special emphasis on the prevention of bullying situations. In addition, training of the staff of the school and training for parents provides knowledge and skills for how to detect and solve bullying situations. It is a very well structured program that by following it with fidelity you get amazing results.”

Conclusion

The OBPP is a comprehensive program that can reduce bullying in schools. Successful bullying prevention efforts require continuous attention and should be woven into the school environment to become a daily part of life at school. The OBPP provides the framework for schools to do this. The multi-components of the program, the inclusion of the entire school community in implementation, as well as available training and resources provide schools with the structure to effectively prevent and address bullying. To learn more about the OBPP visit www.clemson.edu/olweus.

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⁴² Comunicado Personal, 12 de enero de 2018.

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