Changing the Social Contexts of Peer Victimization

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Abstract

Introduction: While school-based prevention programs often target deficits in individual children's social skills in order to limit their aggression or exposure to peer victimization, there is increasing evidence that school-wide and classroom-level factors can affect the success of these programs. **Method**: We describe the WITS Primary Program which takes a community development approach for the prevention of victimization. It was designed for kindergarten to grade 3 students, and aims to create responsive communities for the prevention of peer victimization by engaging the support of parents, teachers, school counselors, older students, and emergency services personnel. **Results**: Evidence supporting the program's feasibility and effectiveness are reported. **Conclusion**: The prevention of peer victimization and bullying may require targeted programs with demonstrated support from many adults in young children's social networks.

Key words: bullying, victimization, children, and prevention

Résumé

Introduction: Alors que nombre de programmes de prévention en milieu scolaire se préoccupent de l'agresseur lui-même, de ses manques d'habiletés sociales, afin de réduire leurs comportements d'agression, il existe des raisons de croire que d'autres facteurs, ceux-là au niveau de la classe et de toute l'école, peuvent influencer le succès de ces programmes. **Méthodologie:** Le programme WITS que nous décrivons ici adopte une approche de prévention globale et communautaire de la victimisation. Ce programme a été instauré pour des enfants de la maternelle à la troisième année dont le but est de s'assurer le soutien des parents, des enseignants, des conseillers scolaires, des étudiants des classes supérieures et du personnel d'intervention de crises dans la prévention de l'agression envers les pairs. **Résultats:** L'étude démontre la faisabilité et l'efficacité d'un tel programme. **Conclusion:** La prévention de l'agression et de l'intimidation envers les pairs peut nécessiter des programmes-cible qui font appel au soutien clairement affiché des adultes qui composent le réseau social des jeunes enfants.

Mots-clé: intimidation, victimisation, enfants et prévention

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Introduction

Several studies have identified behavioral problems (e.g., aggression, disruptiveness) and emotional problems (e.g., worrying, anxiety, fearfulness) as risks for physical and relational victimization by peers (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). While peer victimization occurs in an interpersonal context that frequently includes not only peers, but often parents and other adults, few intervention programs have taken a multi-systems approach to preventing victimization. In this paper, we describe a peer victimization prevention program called "WITS the Rock Solid Primary Program" that invites participation from communities, school personnel and parents in an effort to create contexts that are responsive to young children's requests for help with peer victimization. We also anticipate that school-based counselors and psychologists can serve as "champions" in starting and maintaining the program in their schools and also could make use of the program's resources to help aggressive and victimized children and their families and teachers.

A number of school-based prevention programs are widely available (see reviews by Miller, Brehm, & Whitehouse, 1998; Smith Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). These typically focus on improving children's problem solving skills, social and emotional competence, and capacity to resist bullying. They are generally based on written curricula that are delivered by classroom teachers - sometimes supported by mental health professionals. Several competence-training programs have shown improvements in children's social skills (Miller et al., 1998), but only a few have been successful in reducing victimization or bullying (Smith et al., 2004). There is growing evidence that family, school and classroom contexts influence children's aggression and social competence (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004) and can also affect the success of these prevention programs (Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaudry, & Samples, 1998; Harnish & Guerra, 2000; Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998).

Contexts Of Victimization

Classroom contexts may be particularly important. In elementary schools, classroom compositions determine the peers who children are

exposed to, and interact with, directly and continuously in the course of the school day. Groupings of aggressive, deviant children may reinforce each others' negative behaviors and undermine intervention efforts (Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2002). In one long-term follow-up study of a classroom-based prevention program, "The Good Behavior Game," Kellam et al. (1998) found that aggressive boys' (but not girls') placement in grade 1 classrooms with higher aggregate levels of physically aggressive peers contributed to their behavioral problems in grade 6. Similarly, Leadbeater, Hoglund, and Woods (2003) found that higher *classroom* levels of behavioral problems in grade 1 increased children's risks for peer victimization by the end of grade 2. In addition, children who showed higher levels of emotional problems reported increases in victimization by the end of grade 2, when they had been in grade 1 classrooms with more socially competent children. Bukowski and Sippola (2001) suggest that emotionally distressed children may be victimized by their more competent peers to maintain group homogeneity. Similarly, Aber et al. (1998) investigated the effects of classroom and neighborhood contexts on the effectiveness of the "Resolving Conflict Creatively Program" violence prevention program for children in grades 2 to 6. The positive effects of program lessons focused on limiting children's aggressive thoughts were diminished for children in classrooms where more children rated the use of aggression as "acceptable" and also for children living in poorer, more violent neighborhoods.

On the other hand, classroom-based programs that increase cooperative, prosocial peer behaviors at the classroom level appear to reduce aggression in children, particularly for boys. The classroom-based "Good Behavior Game" that rewarded cooperative behaviors buffered the effect of classroom levels of aggression on boys' risks for behavioral problems in grade 6 (Kellam et al., 1998). In a follow-up evaluation of a kindergarten to grade 4 program directed at creating classrooms where classmates care about and are supportive of one another, Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, and Delucchi (1996) found levels of social understanding and conflict resolution skills were higher in grades 4 to 6 in intervention group children compared to control group children. Vitaro, Brendgen, Pagani, Tremblay, and McDuff (1999) further highlighted the importance of positive peer affiliations in a follow-up study of aggressive boys who were targeted for an intervention program to improve social and problem-solving skills in grade 2. Boys who subsequently associated with non-deviant peers showed lower risks for conduct disorder in grade 6 relative to program boys who associated with deviant peers.

Description Of The Wits Primary Program

Next we describe a community, family, and school-based prevention program that has shown some success in changing the classroom contexts of children's experiences of victimization and aggression (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003; Woods, Coyle, Hoglund, & Leadbeater, in press). The WITS Primary Program was designed for kindergarten to grade three students and can be implemented across several contexts in children's social environment including schools, playgrounds, and families' homes. The program focuses on the prevention of victimization (rather than bullying) because bullies are often themselves the victims (Peplar, Craig, Yuile, & Connolly, 2004) and because adults may respond more positively to victims calls for help than to the aggressive behaviors of children identified as bullies.

While not meant to replace social skills training programs, the WITS program offers a common language and common strategies to everyone in children's social networks. The goal is to create responsive environments where the adults can help children to "use their WITS" to deal with peer aggression. The "WITS" acronym stands for Walk away, Ignore the bully, Talk it out and Seek help (see "WITS MANUAL" at www.youth.society.uvic.ca). Using your WITS to Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, and Seek help" can become code words with school-wide visibility and parent and community support. The ideal is to create school, classroom and family environments that speak with a uniform voice to respond to children's requests for help in dealing with victimization and to promote positive conflict resolution strategies. Children learn that conflicts are resolvable and that adults know how to help them.

WITS conceptual framework. The development of the WITS program was a coordinated initiative between elementary school educators, The Rock Solid Foundation (a community-based not-for-profit police group), and university-based researchers in developmental psychology. The program takes a comprehensive, multi-setting approach to reducing peer victimization and enhancing social competence at the school- and classroom-level. This program is linked to the school district's mission of creating responsive and safe school environments that enhance students' social and emotional competence, social responsibility, and learning outcomes. The WITS program has multiple components (see Table 1 and below) and is set out in an easily accessed manual that is available on our website,

www.youth.society.uvic.ca. A manual for emergency service personnel tells school-based police liaisons, firefighters or paramedics how they can conduct the initiation ceremony and make monthly visits to the school. Student athletes from high schools and universities can also make school visits to ask children how they are doing with using their WITS. Age appropriate picture books that show children and adults using their WITS are listed and curriculum that was developed for use by teachers, librarians and counselors is accessible. The WITS manual also provides suggestions for multi-site activities that invite creativity and that can be adapted to the needs and interests of a particular families, schools, and communities. The WITS for "Siblings and Friends" pamphlet tells parents about peer conflict and how they can use the WITS program at home. For example, parents can use "WITS time outs" by suggesting that children "walk away and ignore the conflict" with siblings (to stop a conflict and to help children regulate their anger) and to come back when they are ready to "talk it out and get help" with solving the problem.

Table 1 WITS Program Components

1. *Teacher Curriculum*	Directs teachers to a wealth of early childhood literature and activities that can be used to reinforce WITS messages in the classroom. The curriculum addresses the learning outcomes required for elementary school curricula concerning social skills and responsibility, personal planning, language and visual arts, and drama.
2. *Emergency workers manual*	Walks police, firefighters or paramedics through the swearing-in-ceremony where kindergarten to grade 3 children are "deputized" as police helpers to keep their school safe and help other children. A stuffed walrus mascot (Witsup) is given to each school. WITS activity books, bookmarks, etc. are given to the children as reminders and to take these messages home.
3. *Library Curriculum*	Details curriculum and activities for a list of popular picture books. It also includes information that is central to a librarian's curricula including effective literacy techniques used in the stories, vocabulary building, etc.
4. *University Athlete Curriculum*	Uses student athletes to provide positive role models from the community who advocate "using your WITS" in short visits to elementary school classrooms over the school year. The students are organized and supervised by a community liaison hired by the police group and are supported by the police officer assigned to the school.
5. *W.I.T.S for Siblings and Friends*	Guides parents in using WITS to resolve conflicts between siblings or children and their friends, using books and TV programs, to identify WITS strategies. Time outs prescribe "walking away" to think about good solutions to deal with problems.

Establishing this program in a school or school district requires a "champion" or "champions" to bring it forward (typically a school-based police officer, teacher, librarian, or school counselor) and some initial funding to ensure the books are accessible through the school library or in classrooms. It also requires support from school principals. Parent involvement in championing the program would likely also strengthen the implementation of the program. In our district, the program implementation was not sudden. Most frequently, it snow-balled class-by-class and school-by-school over time as support for the program gradually emerged among the adults in the child's environment. This is characteristic of community development initiatives that bubble up from the enthusiasm of its supporters, given reasonable access to resources.

Evaluating Program Feasibilty And Effectiveness

We have evaluated the feasibility and effectiveness of the WITS Primary Programs in a five-year longitudinal study involved elementary school students from 41 classrooms in 17 urban schools. Baseline data were collected at the start of grade 1 (fall of 2000) from 409 children (290 in program schools and 119 in control schools; 49% girls; mean age 6-years, 3-months). Follow-up data were collected at the ends of grade 1 (spring of 2001) from 400 children, grade 2 from 375 children, grade 3 from 363 children and at the end of grade 5 from 245 children. (See Leadbeater et al. [2003] for a description of the research design and measures, and assessment of the fidelity of implementation of the program).
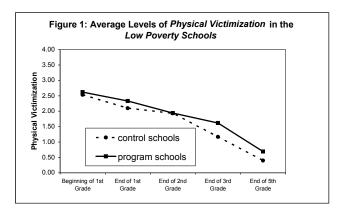
As described in Leadbeater et al. (2003), we initially investigated whether *classroom characteristics* (average levels of social competence, emotional problems, and behavioral problems) and *school-wide characteristics* (proportion of children on income assistance and program versus control school) as experienced in grade 1, influenced changes in children's reports of relational and physical victimization at the end of grade 2. Classroom levels of
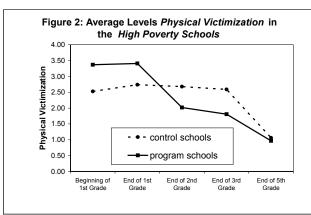
relational victimization decreased significantly in the *program schools* compared to the *control schools* with similar levels of school poverty. The corresponding effect sizes were low to moderate, with stronger program effects evident in the high poverty schools (η^2 = .03 for low poverty schools and .10 for high poverty schools). Classroom levels of *physical victimization* also decreased significantly in the *program schools* compared to the *control schools* with similar levels of school poverty. Again, the effect sizes were low to moderate, with stronger program effects in the high poverty schools (η^2 = .02 for low poverty schools and .14 for high poverty schools).
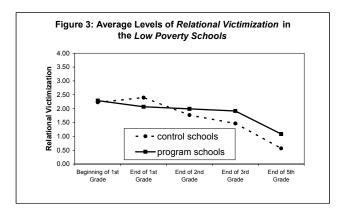
In analyses of the longitudinal data, and as shown Figures 1 to 4, physical and relational victimization drop more in *high poverty program schools* compared to the *high poverty control schools* by the end of grade 3 (η^2 = .02 for physical victimization and .06 for relational victimization). Fewer treatment group differences were found for the low poverty schools. The formal evaluation of the program ended with the grade 3 w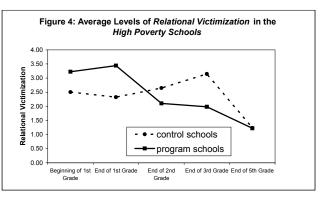ave of data and most of the control schools adopted the WITS program in some form by the next school year. At our follow up at the end of grade 5 of 245 children from the original sample showed that levels of victimization had dropped further in all schools.

The proportion of children who reported being victimized "sometimes" to "almost all the time" decreased noticeably from the start of grade 1 to end of grade 5 for both physical victimization (from 16.1% to 2.0%) and relational victimization (from 14.7% to 5.3%). While these results are encouraging, it is not possible to attribute this continued decrease to program effects, given both the absence of a control sample and the relatively high level of attrition. Rates at the end of grade 5 are also lower than what is usually reported in the literature. However, few studies have examined rates of physical and relational over this length of time. We have begun to develop the WITS LEADS[2] program that is developmentally appropriate for children in grades 4, 5 and 6 and engages older students in the school community in helping others to use their WITS.

Figure 1: Average Levels of *Physical Victimization* in the *Low Poverty Schools*

Figure 2: Average Levels *Physical Victimization* in the *High Poverty Schools*

Figure 3: Average Levels of *Relational Victimization* in the *Low Poverty Schools*

Figure 4: Average Levels of *Relational Victimization* in the *High Poverty Schools*

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[2] LEADS stands for "Look and Listen," "Explore points of View," "Act," "Did it work?" and "Seek Help''

Conclusions

Consistent with other evaluations of comprehensive school-based programming (Aber, Brown, & Jones, 2003; Comer, 1985; Olweus, 1993), our findings suggest that peer victimization can be reduced through universal, multi-setting programs that directly target victimization to children and adults. The active ingredients of action of this multi-component and multi-setting program are unclear. It may work by teaching developmentally appropriate and targeted skills for stopping victimization or by changing the communities' acceptance of victimization through the support of visible (uniformed) community members; school staff, and parents. Importantly, stronger program effect sizes were evident in the high poverty schools, perhaps suggesting the greater need in these schools for consistent, community-level messages to adults and children about how to cope with peer victimization.

It should be restated that the schools in this evaluation also had a variety of other programs (primarily targeting the development of individual levels of social skills) as well as suspension policies for dealing with excessively aggressive children. These additional programs could have influenced our findings. However, none of these programs directly targeted peer victimization and WITS was the only program consistently found in the program schools and not in the control schools. The low to moderate program effect sizes observed indicate that the WITS program holds promise for reducing victimization beyond programs focused on individual levels of social skills, particularly in high poverty schools. Unexamined characteristics of teachers and schools and the number of children in the classrooms who did not participate in the evaluation may have also influenced our findings and require further study. The schools volunteered to participate in the evaluation and individual teachers affected the level of program implemented in schools. Also our nonrandom design limits the generalizability of our findings. However, the feasibility of implementing this kind of community-wide intervention is confirmed.

Zero tolerance school disciplinary policies can be common reactions to failures of prevention programs, but suspensions rarely suggest positive alternatives to children who are struggling to respond to the values of the many different "cultures" that surround them. Classroom, playground, school, home and neighborhood cultures can vary widely in their tolerance for aggression. While further research is clearly needed to unravel the effects of multi-level contexts on victimization, our findings suggest that creating school, family, and community cultures that speak with a uniform voice about peaceful solutions to peer conflicts hold promise for reducing peer victimization - particularly in schools with higher student poverty levels.

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