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Susan P. Limber

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The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
An Overview of Its Implementation and Research Basis

Susan P. Limber
Clemson University, South Carolina

Abstract
The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is a schoolwide program designed to reduce bullying among students in elementary, middle, and junior high grades. Program components are described at the schoolwide, classroom, individual, and community levels. Large-scale evaluations of the program in Norway have shown marked reductions in bullying, as well as improvements in school climate. Evaluations of the OBPP in diverse public schools in the United States are described. Results in these settings have not produced uniformly positive results, but they have shown program effects in reduction of self-reported bullying and engagement in antisocial behavior. Directions for future research are discussed.

Background and Importance of the Issue
Bullying is most commonly defined as repeated aggressive behavior in which there is an imbalance of power or strength between the two parties (Craig et al., 2009; Nansel et al., 2001;
Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 2010a). Bullying may be carried out through both direct (e.g., hitting, insults, threats) and indirect means (e.g., rumor-spreading, social exclusion, manipulation of friendships) (Craig et al., 2009; Olweus, 1993).

**Prevalence**

Dan Olweus (1993) conducted the earliest systematic investigations of the prevalence of bullying by studying more than 150,000 Norwegian and Swedish children ages 8–15 years in the 1980s and found that 15% of students reported being involved in bully/victim problems “2–3 times per month or more often.” Nine percent reported that their peers had bullied them, 7% indicated that they had bullied others, and approximately 2% had bullied others and also had been bullied.

Recent cross-national studies confirm that bullying is commonplace around the globe. Craig and colleagues (2009) used the same criteria for defining bullying that was established by Olweus (i.e., 2–3 times/month or more in the previous 2 months) in the Health Behavior of School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey of nationally representative samples of 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old school children in 40 countries during the 2005/2006 school year. They observed that 11% of these students had bullied others, 13% had been bullied, and 4% had both bullied others and been bullied. They noted that involvement in bullying (as “bully,” “victim,” or “bully-victim”) varied dramatically across the countries, with the lowest involvement being reported in Sweden (involving 9% of boys and 5% of girls) and the highest involvement being reported in Lithuania (reported by 45% of boys and 36% of girls). These differences likely reflect social and cultural differences in bullying (or in participants’ understanding of the term) and in the implementation of policies and programs to address it (Craig et al., 2009).

In the first nationally representative study of students in the United States, Nansel et al. (2001) surveyed more than 15,000 students in Grades 6–10 and found that 30% of students had been frequently involved in bullying (with 13% involved as bully, 11% as victim, and 6% as bully-victims). These authors concluded in 2001, that involvement of American school children in bullying was “substantial” (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2094). More recent national surveys of confirm that bullying is a national concern in the United States. In the HBSC study conducted in 2005 (Craig et al., 2009), 22% of American boys and 17% of American girls (ages 11, 13, and 15 years) reported regular involvement in bullying (as bullies, victims, or bully-victims). The 2007 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009) found that 32% of students ages 12–18 years reported being bullied during the school year. The 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) reported that nearly 20% of high school students had been bullied on school grounds in the previous year. In their survey of 524,054 students in grades 3–12 from 1,593 schools in 45 states, Olweus and Limber (2010c) found that 17% of students had been bullied frequently during a single school semester (2–3 times/month or more often), and 10% had bullied others frequently.

**Concerns About Bullying**

The culmination of two decades of research indicates that bullying can seriously affect the psychosocial functioning, academic work, and the health of children who are targeted. Bully victimization is related to lower self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges & Perry, 1996), higher rates of depression (Craig, 1998; Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1978), loneliness (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001), anxiety (Craig, 1998; Fekkes et al., 2004; Hodges & Perry, 1996), and suicidal ideation (Rigby, 1996). Children who are bullied are also more likely than their nonbullied peers to report physical ailments. In a study of 2,766 Dutch school children ages 9–12 years (Fekkes et al., 2004), those who had been bullied were approximately three times as likely to experience headaches, wet
their beds, and feel listless; they were about twice as likely as their peers to have problems sleeping, have stomach pain, feel tense, feel tired, and have a poor appetite. Finally, there is evidence that bullying may be related to academic difficulties. Bullied children are more likely than their peers to want to avoid going to school (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996) and have higher absenteeism rates (Rigby, 1996; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004). In a longitudinal study of students in Grades K–5, Buhs and colleagues (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald-Brown, 2010) observed that children who were rejected by their peers in kindergarten were more likely than others to be excluded and victimized by peers throughout elementary school. These excluded children were, in turn, less likely to participate in class and ultimately performed more poorly on tests of academic achievement. Those students who were victimized were less likely to attend school.

Research also suggests that there is reason to be concerned about children who bully. Children who bully their peers have been found to be more likely than other children and youth to be engaged in antisocial, violent, and/or troubling behavior. Findings from research in the United States and abroad indicate, for example, that children who bully are more likely to be involved in fighting (Nansel et al., 2001, Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003; Olweus, 1993), vandalize property (Olweus, 1993), carry a weapon (Nansel et al., 2003), and smoke and drink alcohol (Nansel et al., 2001). They also are more likely than their nonbullying peers to report poorer academic achievement (Nansel et al., 2001), be truant (Byrne, 1994; Olweus, 1993), and drop out of school (Byrne, 1994).

**Interest in Bullying Prevention**

Interest in bullying prevention has increased dramatically over the last two decades among educators, policymakers, and the general public (Limber, 2003, 2004). In the United States, this increased attention to bullying appears to have been fueled in part by the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 (Limber, 2004), and by subsequent reports by the media, government, and researchers that noted linkages between instances of school shootings and peer bullying of the perpetrators (Anderson et al., 2001; Fein et al., 2002). More recently, reports in the American news media of suicides of bullied youth (Mulvihill, 2010) have kept the issue of bullying on the minds of the lay public and policy makers in the United States.

Legislative attention to bullying in the United States has been particularly pronounced in the last decade. Before 1999, state laws addressing bullying in schools did not exist (Alley & Limber, 2009; Limber & Small, 2003). Currently, 47 states have antibullying laws in place (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2010). Almost all statutes require public school districts (or in some cases individual schools) to develop policies about bullying. Beyond this commonality, however, the laws vary a good bit in their definitions of bullying, what they require or recommend be included in these policies, and whether they require state departments of education to create model policies (Alley & Limber, 2009).

Numerous school-based programs, curricula, teacher’s guides, books, videos, and other materials focused on bullying prevention have been introduced to the American marketplace, and government–supported (e.g., “Take a Stand. Lend a Hand. Stop Bullying Now!” sponsored by the Health Resources and Services Administration; Bryn, 2011) and private sector (e.g., “Stop Bullying: Speak Up.” developed by the Cartoon Network) public information campaigns have been launched in recent years to address bullying.

**Conceptual Basis for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program**

Among school-based bullying prevention programs, one of the best known is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP; Olweus, 1991, 1993; Olweus et al., 2007; Olweus, Limber,
& Mihalic, 1999). The program was developed by Dan Olweus in the mid-1980s in Norway, as part of a nation-wide campaign against bullying in schools (Olweus & Limber, 2010a). The program was designed to address known risk factors for bullying behavior and to build upon protective factors within the child’s social ecology. The focus of the OBPP is on reducing bullying through a restructuring of the child’s social environment at school. This restructuring is intended to reduce the number of opportunities that students have to bully and to reduce the rewards for exhibiting bullying behavior. In addition, positive, prosocial behaviors are encouraged and rewarded (Olweus et al., 2007). The OBPP is built upon several key principles based on adults in school: (a) showing warmth and involvement in the lives of their students; (b) establishing clear rules for students’ behavior; (c) consistently using nonphysical, nonhostile consequences when rules are not followed; and (d) acting as authorities and positive role models (Olweus, 1993; Olweus et al., 2007).

Description of the OBPP Approach

These principles have been translated into program components that are implemented at the schoolwide level, the classroom level, the individual level, and in some contexts, the community level.

Schoolwide Components

Eight program components are implemented schoolwide as part of the OBPP (Olweus et al., 2007). Each will be described briefly. Together, these schoolwide components provide the structures and procedures that are critical to systems change.

Establish a Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee

The Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee (BPCC) is a group of 8–15 representatives from the school community (e.g., an administrator, a teacher from each grade, a school counselor and/or other school-based mental health professional, a member of the nonteaching staff, and at least one parent) that is responsible for ensuring that all program components are implemented. The committee meets regularly to review data from the student survey, plan for the implementation of the program, coordinate the program with other prevention efforts at the school, obtain ongoing feedback about the implementation of the program, and ensure that the effort is integrated into the school’s other prevention and intervention efforts and continued over time (Olweus et al., 2007).

Conduct Training and Provide Ongoing Consultation

Members of the BPCC participate in an intensive two-day training and receive at least one year of monthly consultation by a certified OBPP trainer in order to help ensure fidelity to the model. Members of the BPCC, in turn, provide one day of training (often with assistance from the certified trainer) to all school staff prior to launching the OBPP.

Administer the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire

The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire is an a 40-item self-report measure, administered to students in Grades 3 and higher, that is designed to measure the extent of bully/victim problems
within a school, the most common locations for bullying, and student perceptions of and attitudes toward bullying (Olweus, 2007; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The OBQ is given annually—prior to the implementation of the OBBP, and at yearly intervals thereafter. Findings from the questionnaire can help school leaders raise awareness about bullying among adults and students, develop school-specific plans to implement the OBPP, and assess change in behavior and attitudes over time.

**Hold Staff Discussion Group Meetings**

Recognizing the a once-a-year training is not sufficient to ensure effective implementation of the OBPP, groups of teachers and other staff meet regularly to continue their education about the OBPP. During these meetings, staff members discuss bullying prevention and related efforts at their school, learn from each others’ efforts, and assess the ongoing implementation of the program (Olweus et al., 2007).

**Introduce and Enforce School Rules About Bullying**

Schools are encouraged to adopt four school rules about bullying: (a) we will not bully others; (b) we will try to help students who are bullied; (c) we will try to include students who are left out; and (d) if we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home (Olweus et al., 2007). These rules are posted widely in the school and discussed with students and parents. The use of consistent positive and negative consequences is encouraged to reinforce these rules.

**Review and Refine the Supervisory System**

The BPCC within each school reviews and adjusts its supervisory system to reduce the opportunities for bullying among students. This review includes identifying common locations for bullying (from the students responses on the OBQ), developing specific strategies to increase supervision in these locations, tracking and reporting bullying incidents, and evaluating the physical design of the school (Olweus et al., 2007).

**Hold a Schoolwide Kick-off Event to Launch the Program**

Each school launches its OBPP with an event for students (and often parents) that is designed to increase awareness about bullying, introduce the program to the school community, and explain the school’s rules and procedures for addressing bullying.

**Involve Parents**

Parents are engaged in the program through a variety of strategies, including representation on the school’s bullying prevention coordinating committee and through participation in school-wide meetings with school staff. Parents also receive printed information about the program and periodic updates through school newsletters and other channels.

**Classroom-Level Components**

There are three standard components of the OBPP that are administered within classrooms (Olweus et al., 2007).
Post, Discuss, and Enforce Schoolwide Rules About Bullying

Classroom teachers discuss in detail with students the schoolwide rules against bullying. Doing so is important to ensure a common understanding of the rules and their application. These rules are revisited on a regular basis throughout the school year.

Hold Regular Class Meetings About Bullying and Related Topics

Regular (weekly) class meetings are a critical component of the OBPP (Olweus et al., 2007). Meetings are designed to build class community, provide an opportunity to discuss the school’s rules about bullying, help students understand their roles in preventing and stopping bullying, and problem-solve strategies for addressing bullying and related issues. These class meetings utilize discussion, role-plays, and other creative activities designed to help them better understand the harms caused by bullying and effective strategies to address bullying (Olweus et al., 2007).

Hold Class Meetings with Parents

Teachers are encouraged to hold several meetings about the OBPP among parents of students in their individual classes. The goals of these meetings are to help parents better understand the issue of bullying and how the OBPP is addressing it, and to increase parent involvement in the prevention of bullying.

Individual-Level Components

In addition to the school-level and classroom-level interventions, the program also involves interventions that are targeted at individual students (Olweus et al., 2007). Meetings are held with students who bully and (separately) with students who are bullied, in order to help to ensure that bullying stops and that children get additional support and/or guidance that they may need. School personnel are also encouraged to meet with parents of involved students and develop individual intervention plans for involved students, as needed.

Community-Level Components

Although the original Norwegian model did not include community-level components, we have found that U.S. schools benefit from involving one or more relevant community members (e.g., after-school program coordinator) on the Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee, developing school-community partnerships to support the school’s program, and spreading anti-bullying messages and principles in the community (Olweus et al., 2007).

Cultural Adaptations

Since its development, the principles and components of the OBPP have remained largely unchanged. However, research and experience in implementing the program have naturally led to some adaptations to help ensure that it is appropriate to specific cultural contexts (Olweus & Limber, 2010a; Limber, 2010; Limber, 2011). As noted above, for example, community engagement has been emphasized in U.S. but not in Norwegian implementation of the OBPP. In addition, the BPCC has assumed a more prominent role in the planning and ongoing coordination of the program in the United States than in Norway, whereas Norwegian schools have focused relatively more time and effort on holding staff discussion groups. As a final example, U.S. teachers have experienced greater challenges in holding class meetings than their Norwegian colleagues.
These challenges involve time constraints to hold the meetings as well as experience and comfort with facilitating discussions with students on sensitive issues. As a result, additional program resources have been developed to help teachers lead class meetings more effectively (Flexx et al., 2008, 2009a, 2009b). For a more detailed analysis of cultural adaptations, see Limber (2011).

Relevant Research

Over the past two decades, a research base has grown slowly but steadily, that has assessed the effectiveness of the Olweus program in a variety of cultures and communities. In addition, findings provide insight into teacher- and school-level variables that predict more complete implementation of the program.

Outcome Research

Six comprehensive outcome studies of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program have been conducted in Norway. Each will be summarized briefly below, beginning with initial evaluations of the program in Norway by program developer, Dan Olweus. Following this discussion, more recent evaluations of the program will be highlighted in Norway and the United States. Finally, I will note several evaluations of programs that have been inspired by the OBPP and describe findings of several meta-analyses of bullying prevention programs.

Initial Evaluations

The first evaluation of the Olweus program took place between 1983 and 1985 and involved approximately 2,500 children in Grades 5–8 from elementary and junior high schools in Bergen, Norway (Olweus, 1991, 1997, 2005). Using a quasi-experimental (age-cohorts) design, Olweus found significant and substantial reductions in students’ self-reports of being bullied (reductions of 62% after 8 months and 64% after 20 months) and bullying others (reductions of 33% after 8 months and 53% after 20 months). Peer and teacher ratings of the level of bully/victim problems produced largely similar. Olweus also observed significant reductions in self-reported vandalism, theft, and truancy. Significant improvements in the social climate of the classroom were reflected in students’ reports of increased satisfaction with school life, improved order and discipline at school, and more positive social relationships (Olweus, 1991, 1997). Olweus also observed a dosage-response relationship at the classroom level, such that those classrooms that implemented essential components of the program (including establishment of rules against bullying and classroom meetings) saw greater reductions in bully/victim problems (Olweus & Alsaker, 1991; Olweus & Kallestad, 2010).

More Recent Studies in Norway

Since the initial evaluation of the OBPP, six follow-up studies evaluating the program have been conducted in Norway, involving more than 20,000 students from more than 150 schools. Consistently positive program effects have been documented for students in Grades 4–7 (Limber, 2011; Olweus & Limber 2010a). Of particular significance is a long-term study (using an extended selection cohorts design) with students in 14 schools in Oslo, and which included approximately 3,000 students at each of 5 yearly assessments between 2001 and 2006. Olweus observed 40% reductions in self-reports of being bullied and 51% decreases in reports of bullying others.

These results are particularly significant because it has been shown (e.g., Beelmann, Pfingsten, & Lösel, 1994) that many program effects are short-lived. As Olweus and Limber note,
“The[se] results show that the effects of the OBPP can be long-lasting and suggest that the intervention schools had been able to change their “culture” and ability to counteract bullying in a more permanent way” (p. 128).

Positive outcomes from the OBPP also have been found with students in Grades 8–10, but these results have been somewhat less consistent and the effects somewhat weaker than those involving younger students. For a more detailed description of evaluations involving older students, see Olweus & Limber (2010a).

Evaluation in the United States

The first systematic evaluation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in the United States (Limber et al., 2004; Melton et al., 1998; Olweus & Limber, 2010a, b) was conducted in the mid-1990s, involving students from elementary and middle schools in the South Carolina. Students were predominantly African American, and the schools were located in predominantly rural communities of low socioeconomic status. After one year of implementation, researchers observed significant time x group (intervention vs. comparison) interactions for self-reports of bullying others, and a 28% relative reduction in bullying others was observed in intervention versus comparison schools. Significant program effects were also documented between intervention and control schools with regard to students’ self-reports of delinquency, vandalism, school misbehavior, and sanctions for school misbehavior. No significant differences in girls’ reports of bully victimization were observed, however. The program continued an additional year, but researchers documented such low fidelity in participating schools that they concluded it could no longer be considered a faithful implementation of the model.

The OBPP was subsequently evaluated over the course of four years in six large public elementary and middle schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Black & Jackson, 2007). Researchers developed an observational measure of Bullying Incident Density (i.e., the number of bullying incidents per 100 student observation hours) to document the number of incidents of physical, verbal, and emotional bullying during recess (for elementary students) and lunchtime (for middle school students). Bullying incident density decreased 45% over the four years of the project (from 65 to 36 incidents/100 student hours. Evaluators also examined program effects using student self-reports on the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire. Unfortunately, because there was substantial attrition in responses over the years, conclusions cannot be drawn from these self-report data (Limber, 2011; Olweus & Limber, 2010a).

The OBPP was evaluated in Washington state by Bauer, Lozano, and Rivara (2007) using a nonrandomized control design with middle school students in seven intervention and three control schools. Researchers noted positive program effects for students’ perceptions that other students actively intervened in bullying incidents (using the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire) and for physical victimization (relative reduction of 37%) and relational victimization (reduction of 28%) among White students. Curiously, no program effects were observed for students of other races or ethnicities.

Pagliocca, Limber, and Hashima (2007) evaluated the OBPP in a small-scale study with three elementary schools in a suburban community in southern California. Using a selection cohorts design over three years, researchers examined students, teachers’, and parents’ perceptions of bullying. Students’ reports of being bullied decreased 21% after one year and 14% after two years; reports of bullying others decreased 8% after one year and 17% after two years. Increases were also observed in bullied students’ likelihood of reporting being bullied to a teacher and their perceptions that teachers at school try to stop bullying. There also were marked increases in teachers’ perceptions that the school had clear rules about bullying, that teachers felt they knew how to respond to bullying, and that teachers felt that the school’s bu-
lying policies had been clearly communicated to students, parents, teachers, and nonteaching staff (increases of 72%–92%).

**Related Evaluations of Bullying Prevention Programs**

A number of bullying prevention efforts inspired (at least in part) by the OBPP have been implemented in Canada (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994; Pepler, Craig, O’Connell, Atlas, & Charach, 2004) and Western Europe (e.g., Stevens, DeBourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2000, Stevens, Van Oost, & DeBourdeaudhuij, 2004, in Belgium; Hanewinkel, 2004, in Germany; Smith, Sharp, Eslea, & Thompson, 2004, and Whitney, Rivers, Smith, & Sharp, 1994, in the United Kingdom). As noted by Olweus and Limber (2010a), these models departed significantly, albeit to different degrees, from the OBPP and therefore cannot be viewed as true replications. Findings from these studies have been mixed.

Several meta-analyses of bullying prevention efforts have been conducted (e.g., Merrell, Guelder, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Ttofi, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008; Ttofi & Farrington, 2009) and have come to somewhat different conclusions about the effectiveness of programs to prevent bullying. The study by Ttofi and Farrington (Ttofi et al., 2008; Ttofi & Farrington, 2009) is generally seen as the most comprehensive. It included 59 studies and is “noteworthy because of the rigorous study selection procedures used” (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010, p. 42). The study authors concluded that comprehensive bullying prevention programs can be successful but that there is variation in the effects of different programs, with those programs “inspired by the work of Dan Olweus work[ing] best” (Ttofi et al., 2008, p. 69).

**Predictors of Program Implementation**

Research on the Olweus program and experience in the field confirm that levels of implementation of the program vary substantially among teachers and schools (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Olweus & Limber, 2010a, b). Systematic research into the adoption of elements of prevention programs is relatively scarce but critical. As Biglan (1995) emphasized, “the adoption of an effective practice is itself a behavior in need of scientific research” (p. 15). In order to better understand the characteristics of teachers and schools that might explain these differences in program implementation, Kallestad and Olweus (2003) analyzed data from a questionnaire that had been administered to 89 Norwegian teachers at two points in time: October/November of 1983 and May/June of 1984. The 89 teachers were drawn from 37 schools and taught in Grades 6–9.

Five teacher-level variables were found to be strong predictors of program implementation and accounted for 53% of the variance in the program’s implementation within a classroom (see Table 27.1 for a summary). Program implementation was strongest where teachers: (a) viewed themselves, their colleagues, and their schools as important agents for change in addressing bullying; (b) read the available program materials; (c) perceived more bullying among students in their class; (d) reported having been bullied themselves as children; and (e) said they felt upset and uncomfortable about bullying among students. Several school-level variables were also predictive of program implementation. Schools that had more openness in communication among teachers (by teacher report) implemented more classroom elements, and those that had implemented more bullying prevention activities for their staff (e.g., had presented results from the bully/victim questionnaire to staff, held an in-service for teachers, encouraged formal and informal staff discussion about bullying) had teachers who implemented more of the program components in their classrooms. As highlighted in Table 27.1, each of these predictors of program implementation have implications for practice in schools that are implementing the model.
Limitations of Current Knowledge and Conclusions

Despite the accumulation of research on the OBPP over the last two decades, additional research will be helpful to assess its implementation and effectiveness in diverse regional settings of the United States (as well as internationally), and among students of different grade levels, gender, and ethnic and cultural groups. Recognizing the varying levels of fidelity with which schools implement the program, future work should focus on better understanding those elements of the program that are most critical to its success, as well as variables that predict more faithful implementation of those program elements. Two large-scale studies in the United States that are underway in Pennsylvania (Masiello, 2009) and Virginia (Moffett, 2010) with diverse populations will provide additional insight into such issues. Preliminary findings from each are quite promising. Further research also is needed to assess the OBPP’s success in influencing other antisocial and/or violent behaviors among children and youth, impacting academic achievement and other measures of school success, and affecting the climates of schools. Ongoing evaluation of the dissemination of the OBPP also will be important, including an assessment of which schools are ready to implement the program, and what variables best predict implementation of the program with fidelity.

Note

1. BID = \# incidents \*(100/n \* 60/t), where n = number of students observed and t = total time period observed (in minutes).
References


