

Replication and Extension of the Early Childhood Friendship Project: Effects on Physical and Relational Bullying

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This study sought to extend the findings of the original ECFP intervention by expanding the program's content and examining the program's effects on young children's bullying behaviors. The study found that the ECFP-2 intervention reduced relational bullying for boys and girls and relational and physical victimization for girls.

Intervening early to change young children's problematic behaviors may be critical to helping them develop into well-adjusted adolescents and adults. The Early Childhood Friendship Project (ECFP) is some of the first intervention work in early childhood that targets 3- to 5-year-olds' physical (i.e., using physical force to harm others, such as hitting, kicking, and pushing) as well as relational aggression (i.e., using the removal of the relationship as a means to harm, including exclusion, ignoring, and spreading malicious rumors). By intervening on aggressive behavior early, the ECFP attempts to increase the chance that children develop positive peer interactions and relationships later in life.

The ECFP program is designed to be used in a classroom setting and aims to both reduce children's aggression and to promote positive helping behaviors. This is done through lessons such as puppet shows and activities, which involve modeling problem solving skills, discouraging aggressive behaviors, and promoting social and emotional skills training.

In the current study, the ECFP-2 deviates from the original ECFP in a few ways. First, the program was expanded from 6 to 8 weeks to add two new lessons: one about the difference between tattling and reporting (i.e., the program emphasizes that reporting keeps children safe) and another lesson about sharing and helping behaviors. Second, the ECFP-2 examined bullying as distinct from aggressive behavior. Bullying is defined as aggressive behavior that involves a power imbalance, such as a larger or more popular child targeting a smaller or less popular child, as well as repetition or the threat of repetition of the bullying behavior.

The Study

The goals of the current study were to replicate findings from the original ECFP study as well as to extend those findings to bullying behaviors. Based on prior success with the ECFP intervention, we expected that in classrooms receiving the ECFP-2 there would be less physical and relational bullying compared to classrooms not receiving the program. We also expected the program could be differentially effective for boys and girls.

Participants included 141 children (67 girls) from 12 classrooms in 6 preschools, which were all accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Children represented diverse racial backgrounds (3% African American, 11% Asian, 69% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, 14% biracial, 1% other) and were primarily from suburban middle class families with an average age of 45.53 months. Classrooms were randomly assigned to either receive the ECFP-2 or to not receive the program during the study period. For ethical purposes

given the previous study's positive effects, the control classrooms received the program at the end of the study.

Data was collected from multiple informants including teachers, the Ph.D. students delivering the intervention, and individuals who were trained to observe the children in the classroom. Most data was collected at two time points; 2-3 weeks before and 2-3 weeks after the intervention. Interventionist and teacher ratings of the program were collected after implementation only.

Teachers and observers completed psychometrically valid measures assessing levels of aggression and bullying in each classroom. They also assessed both physical (i.e., how often the child is pushed, shoved) and relational (i.e., how often the child is excluded, ignored) peer victimization.

The fidelity of the program was assessed through independent observations as well as weekly logs kept by interventionists and supervised meetings. Interventionists and teachers also rated the success of the program after it was completed.

The Findings

Reviews of the intervention were favorable. Interventionists were rated as warm, appropriate, good communicators, and engaged in the tasks. Teachers also rated the program as beneficial and believed the interventionists were effective. Additionally, the interventionists thought that the teachers were supportive and the children were engaged and benefited from the program.

The intervention also resulted in positive child outcomes by significantly reducing relational bullying and victimization. First, from pre-intervention to post-intervention, children in the intervention group experienced a decrease in relational bullying and children in the control group experienced an increase in relational bullying (Figure 1). From pre- to post-intervention, there was no difference between the intervention group and control group on physical bullying.

Second, the intervention had an effect on victimization for girls. From pre-intervention to post-intervention, girls in the intervention group experienced a decrease in their rates of physical and relational victimization, whereas girls in the control group experienced an increase in their rates of physical and relational victimization (Figures 2 and 3).

Implications

This experimental study revealed that the ECFP-2 intervention effectively reduced relational bullying for boys and girls, and reduced victimization for girls. This program was implemented in schools and could be added to the teachers' curriculum as a research-based tool to manage negative social behavior in their classrooms. Additionally, the curriculum addresses positive social behaviors, such as helping behavior and emotional skills training, which teachers could use to promote positive social experiences in their classroom.

In sum, the ECFP teaches children developmentally appropriate tools to foster positive relationships and reduce negative social behavior and may be a cost-effective way to reduce bullying and victimization for children in early childhood.

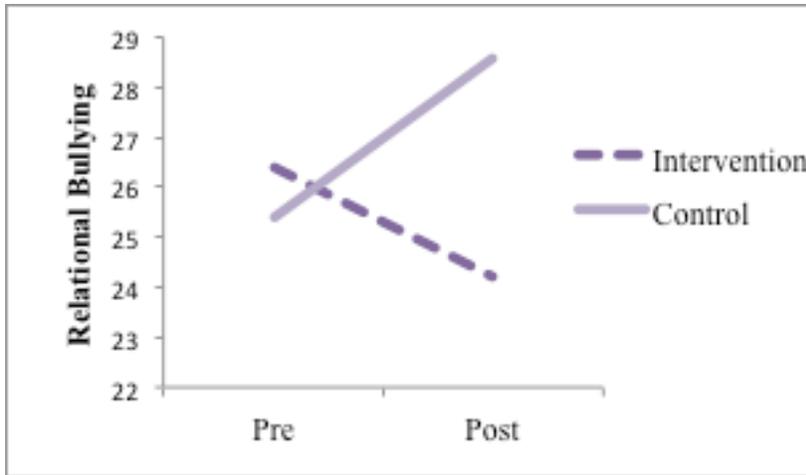


Figure 1: Relational bullying for boys and girls

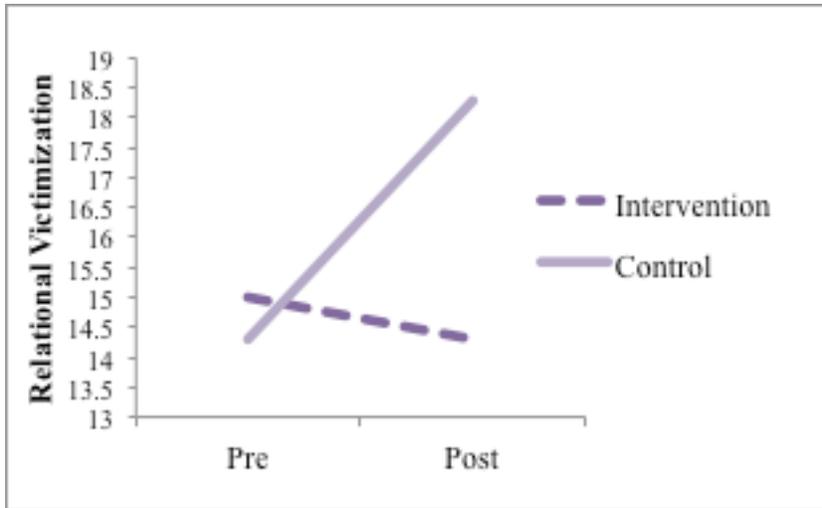


Figure 2: Relational victimization for girls

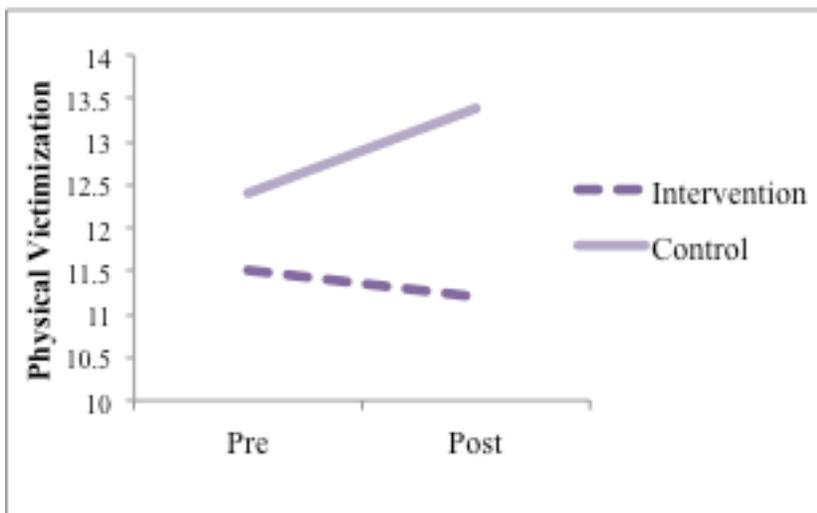


Figure 3: Physical victimization for girls