

Abstract

This study examined the factors that influence a student's willingness to seek help for a threat of violence. The sample consisted of 542 middle school students who completed an anonymous survey that asked students how likely they would be to seek help in response to being bullied or threatened. The survey also included measures of bullying victimization, attitudes toward aggressive behavior, and perceptions of teacher tolerance for bullying. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated that willingness to seek help is lower in higher grade levels and among males. Students who hold aggressive attitudes and perceive the school climate to be tolerant of bullying were less likely to report a willingness to seek help.

Rationale

Several studies have documented the reluctance of students to seek help when they have been bullied (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001; Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). A major finding of both the FBI and Secret Service studies of school shootings (O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) was that many of the student aggressors were themselves victims of bullying whose actions were motivated in part by revenge. Moreover, these victims of bullying almost always communicated their vengeful intentions to peers before the shooting took place, but in most cases those classmates did not seek help from a school staff member or other adult. In light of these findings, it is important to understand the factors that influence a student's decision to seek help for a classmate's threat to commit a violent act.

Study Questions

1. Are there demographic differences between students who report willingness to seek help and those who do not?
2. Are students who have been physically bullied more willing to seek help than students who have been socially or verbally bullied?
3. Are students who have aggressive attitudes and those who perceive teachers as having a high tolerance for bullying less likely to seek help?

Methods

The participants were 542 students at a suburban public middle school. The sample consisted of 264 boys and 244 girls, including 181 sixth graders, 184 seventh graders, and 169 eighth graders (8 students did not report a grade). The mean age of participants was 12.7 years (SD = 1.08) with a range of 10 to 15 years. There were 391 students who identified themselves as Caucasian (72.1%), 63 as African American (11.6%), 23 as Hispanic (4.2%), 22 as Asian (4.1%), 6 as Native American (1.1%), and 22 as other (4.1). Fifteen students (2.8%) did not report an ethnicity.

Teachers at the school administered the *School Climate Survey* to examine the extent and nature of bullying problems at school. The full survey included scales to measure involvement in bullying others as well as being a victim of

bullying, attitudes toward bullying and peer aggression, perceptions of teacher attitudes toward bullying and other aspects of school climate, and willingness to seek help in response to different kinds of threats by students.

The present study measured three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and social. Physical bullying was defined in the survey as "bullying that involves repeatedly hitting, kicking, or shoving someone weaker on purpose;" verbal as "bullying that involves repeatedly teasing, putting down, or insulting someone on purpose;" and social as "bullying that involves getting others repeatedly to ignore or exclude someone on purpose."

Table 1. Student Help-Seeking Questions

Help Seeking Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
If another student was bullying me, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.	17.8%	35.8%	31.1%	15.2%
If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.	5.2%	4.8%	19.7%	70.3%
If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.	6.3%	16.6%	33.0%	44.0%
There are adults at this school I could turn to if I had a personal problem.	11.4%	18.4%	41.5%	28.3%
The teachers at this school are genuinely concerned about me.	20.1%	30.9%	38.1%	11.0%

Results

A 3 X 2 X 2 ANOVA investigated the effects of grade level (6th, 7th, or 8th), gender (m/f), and ethnicity (minority or non-minority) on student reports of willingness to seek help. There were statistically significant effects for both grade level, $F(2, 461) = 6.19, p = .002, \eta^2 = .027$; and gender, $F(4, 461) = 8.38, p = .004, \eta^2 = .018$, but not ethnicity $F(1, 461) = .039, p = .844, \eta^2 = .000$.

The five help-seeking questions were summed into a scale measuring student willingness to seek help. We conducted stepwise multiple regression analyses to predict help seeking. After omitting cases with missing data, the N for this analysis was 410. Gender, grade level, and ethnicity were entered in the first step in order to take those effects into account before examining other independent variables. In the second step, measures of each type of bullying (physical, verbal, and social) were entered. Finally, the third step included student attitudes toward peer aggression and teacher tolerance for bullying.

Demographic Differences.

At step one, the variable most strongly related to whether victims said they would seek help for threats of violence was grade level ($\beta = -.190, p < .001$). As predicted, victims in lower grades were more likely to report that they would seek help than students in higher grades. Also, girls reported more willingness to seek help than boys ($\beta = .123, p = .012$). The total variance accounted for by grade level and gender was .056, $F(3, 406), p < .001$.

Type of Bullying Experienced

At step two, none of the three types of bullying (physical, verbal, or social) were significantly related to willingness to seek help. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who said they had been physically, verbally, or socially bullied.

Table 2. Predictors of Willingness to Seek Help

	β	R ²	ΔR^2
Step 1		.056***	.056***
Gender	.123**		
Grade Level	-.190***		
Ethnicity	.026		
Step 2		.066***	.010
Physically bullied	.046		
Verbally bullied	.054		
Socially bullied	-.030		
Step 3		.400***	.334***
Aggressive attitudes	-.283***		
Teacher tolerance	.478***		

Note. N = 410 **p < .01. ***p < .001.

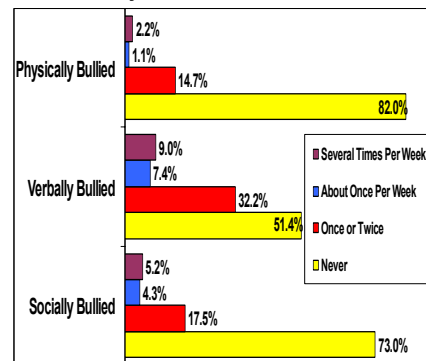
Attitudes and Perceptions

At step three, students whose answers indicated they held more aggressive attitudes were less willing to seek help ($\beta = -.283, p < .001$) and students who saw teachers as being tolerant of bullying within the school were also less willing to seek help ($\beta = .487, p < .001$).

In this final stage, however, the demographic variables that were significant at step one were no longer significant; the grade level coefficient dropped to $-.042 (p = .294)$ and the gender coefficient dropped to $-.004 (p = .931)$. This suggests that the effects of grade level and gender were mediated by the high correlation between those variables and student attitudes. The total variance accounted for by the final model was .40, $F(8, 401) = 33.39, p < .001$.

We also examined the correlations between students' aggressive attitudes and bully victimization. We found positive correlations between aggressive attitudes and both physical bullying, $r(500) = .20, p < .001$ and social bullying, $r(498) = .12, p = .007$. Holding aggressive attitudes was not significantly correlated with verbal bullying.

Figure 1. Student Reports of Being Bullied in the Past 30 Days



Conclusions

Many students are reluctant to seek help for threats of violence at school. Only about half (53%) of the students said they would seek help from a teacher or staff member if another student was bullying them. Although most students would seek help if another student brought a gun (90%) or talked about killing someone (77%), those students who would not seek help are cause for concern. It is important to create a school climate in which all students feel comfortable turning to their teachers in potentially dangerous situations. The strongest predictors of help seeking were student attitudes regarding aggressive behavior and perceived tolerance for bullying by teachers. Students were less willing to report victimization if they believed teachers do not take reports of bullying seriously or do little to stop it.

In part, the reluctance to seek help from adults may be a developmental trend; students in lower grades were consistently more willing to seek help than students in higher grades. Although based on cross-sectional data that do not permit strong inferences about developmental changes, these results are consistent with an adolescent developmental trend toward more independent and autonomous functioning (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001; Smith, Su, & Madsen, 2001).

Student reluctance to seek help for bullying and other threats of violence has not been adequately studied, although it is critically important to successful intervention and prevention efforts. School authorities cannot gauge the extent of bullying in schools, or the effectiveness of their bullying prevention efforts, if students are unwilling to report their victimization experiences. This study demonstrates the pervasiveness of student reluctance to seek help and identifies student attitudes that are associated with a willingness to seek help for bullying and other threatening behavior.

A complete copy of this study is available from the first author: farah@virginia.edu