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Effectiveness of Kind Behavior Promotion in Bullying Prevention Among School-Aged Adolescents

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Focused Question

To what degree does promoting and instilling kind behaviors in school-aged adolescents through social and peer interactions reduce bullying behaviors?

Clinical Scenario

Bullying is an important and prevalent issue among school-aged adolescents and adolescents. The highest rates of bullying were reported in middle schools, followed by high schools, combined schools, and primary schools, respectively. Approximately 1 in 5 high school students experience bullying at school and about 1 in 6 experience cyberbullying. The rates of bullying also differ between groups of individuals. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual counterparts, females are more likely to be bullied than males, and White students reported higher rates of bullying than Hispanic and Black students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). School-aged adolescents were chosen as the population of interest due to the increased frequency of bullying behaviors in middle and high schools.

The term "bullying" has taken on many different meanings over the years. The World Health Organization (2010) recognizes bullying as a major public health problem that demands the joint and coordinated time and attention of many. Bullying is described as a "multifaceted form of mistreatment," that is "characterized by the repeated exposure of one person to physical and/or emotional aggression including teasing, name-calling, mockery, threats, harassment, taunting, hazing, social exclusion or rumors" (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010, p. 403). The effects of bullying in the school setting can lead to mental, physical, and emotional issues that affect victims in both the short and long term. Children who have been involved in bullying are at a much higher risk of experiencing an array of psychosomatic symptoms, running away from home, alcohol and drug abuse, absenteeism, and, most importantly, self-inflicted, accidental, or perpetrated injuries. The ramifications of bullying have been shown to extend beyond adolescence and into adulthood for some individuals. Research has found a significant correlation between childhood bullying behaviors and psychiatric distress later in life (WHO, 2010). The effects of bullying may occur due to the interaction between aspects of the person and their social environment at school.

When considering a theory, the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model closely aligns with the focused question. In this model, the environment is the "sum total of what surrounds a person" (Baptiste, 2017, p. 142). This includes the physical, social, cultural, institutional, and virtual aspects of the environment. Most adolescents spend around twelve years in the school setting engaging in the occupations of education and social participation. Social participation between adolescents and their peers has the potential to impact their well-being in both positive and negative ways. Torrente et al. (2014) stated in a survey that "peer relationships, and socioeconomic status, in particular, play a role in children's functioning and well-being" (p. 154). After further research, it was found that the use of kind behaviors in social interactions may promote well-being and defer aggression and bullying behaviors in school-aged adolescents (Torrente et al., 2014).

For the purpose of this critically appraised topic, kind behavior includes prosocial behaviors, positive behaviors, the use of positive reinforcement, and friendship promotion. Prosocial behaviors have been defined in a survey by Caprara et al. (2014) as "voluntary actions that are undertaken to benefit others" and may include actions such as sharing, consoling, and helping (p. 386). There is evidence that promoting prosocial behaviors within the school system leads to more favorable outcomes in students. Torrente et al. (2014) stated that "prosocial

children were more liked than their less prosocial peers" (p. 141). It was also reported that prosocial children are more likely to build stronger relationships with their peers and demonstrate better school performance. Promoting these positive behaviors was found to be an effective method in decreasing aggression among adolescents (Caprara et al., 2014). Since the use of prosocial behaviors is shown to have a positive impact on students' functioning and social relationships, an intervention focusing on kind behaviors may be beneficial for occupational therapists in the school setting.

School-based occupational therapists focus on supporting the educational needs of children through the use of occupations to promote academic achievement and engagement with peers. Occupational therapy can facilitate bullying prevention and encourage positive peer relationships by teaching and promoting prosocial behaviors. According to a presentation given at the AOTA annual conference in 2020, many practitioners felt as though they were not trained on how to address bullying and did not feel there was support from school staff regarding their possible role in interventions (Njelesani, 2020). School-based occupational therapists are often overlooked when it comes to their role on the school mental health team. Cahill & Egan (2017) found in a cohort study that spreading awareness of the scope of occupational therapy practice among other school professionals can lead to greater understanding and respect of occupational therapy's value as part of the mental health team.

Purpose Statement

School systems continually face challenges with students who engage in problem behaviors such as disruption, non-compliance, and aggression. Currently, there is a lack of evidence supporting occupational therapy interventions for bullying prevention. The purpose of this critically appraised topic is to show the effect of school-based occupational therapy interventions that focus on kind behaviors versus bullying behaviors to prevent bullying among adolescents.

Methodology

An initial literature search was conducted from March 3rd, 2020 to March 10th, 2020. Searches occurred on occupational therapy, education, and multidisciplinary databases, which included the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Premier, and PubMed. When searching for literature, articles were excluded that studied populations that were not adolescents and articles not in English. The following terms were used to search the databases: "occupational therapy," "role," "school," "bullying," "adolescents," "teens," "middle school," "high school," "environment," "context," "kindness," "kind behaviors," "positive behaviors," "social interventions," "prevention programs," "social impacts," "social relationships," "interventions," "school systems," and "bullying interventions". To create a more defined search "AND" or "OR" were added between keywords to create search phrases.

Types of Articles Reviewed

A total of 35 articles were reviewed and 17 were selected for further review. Of the 17 articles reviewed in-depth, two were level I studies (Low et al., 2014; Waasdorp et al., 2012), one was level II (Gage et al., 2019), two were level III (Binfet et al., 2016; Cahill & Egan, 2017), 11 were level IV (Cakmak et al., 2016; Camodeca & Nava, 2020; Caprara et al., 2014; Carney et al., 2018; Donoghue and Meltzer, 2018; Goswami, 2012; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2015; Hutzell and Payne, 2012; Njelesani, 2020; Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017; Torrente et al., 2014) and one was level NA (Reeder et al., 2011). Other resources reviewed included government websites and fact sheets (CDC, 2018; WHO, 2010).

<div align="center">**Synthesis**</div>

Theoretical Base

The goal of this critically appraised topic (CAT) was to gain an understanding of the underlying effects of bullying, the role of the environment, and how we can use occupational therapy as an intervention to decrease these bullying behaviors. To understand these topics, the CAT was looked at from an occupational perspective using the theoretical-based model, Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO). The literature provided evidence that showed bullying is more prevalent within the school context and affects occupational performance through the interactions between the student, school environment, and occupations of education and social participation (Low et al., 2014). Students who directly or indirectly experience bullying have a different perception of the cultural context within the school environment. Carney et al. (2018) stated that cultural factors such as perceived school support, acceptance of diversity, and the sense of connectedness are all negatively correlated with behavioral issues and bullying perpetration. The social capital theory was also reviewed in this article which describes the hypothesis that positive changes in society can occur as a result of supportive social relationships (Carney et al., 2018).

Impact of Bullying on Occupational Participation

Short-Term Effects

Hutzell and Payne (2012) conducted a survey that found that after controlling for gender, age, race and ethnicity, academic achievement, and school type, the Bullying Victimization scale significantly predicted avoidance behaviors. This indicated that students who reported some type of bullying victimization were more likely to avoid locations in or around the school due to fear of attack or harm. Another survey was done by Grinshteyn and Yang (2015) that also looked at bullying and its effect on absences in school but viewed it from the virtual perspective of electronic bullying. The researchers found a significant association between absences in school and the electronic bullying that was taking place. The following data was reported:

> Controlling for model covariates, the relative risk of missing 1 day of school was 1.77 times higher, the relative risk of missing 2 to 3 days of school per month increased by a factor of 2.08, and the relative risk of missing 4 or more days of school per month increased by a factor of 1.77 for those who experienced electronic bullying in the past year compared with those who were not electronically bullied (p. 142).

Not only does bullying affect attendance in school which is crucial for the adolescent population, Donoghue and Meltzer (2018) found that it also affects sleep patterns in students. In their survey, students were categorized as "bully only," "victim only," "bully-victim" which included individuals who were involved in both sides of being the bully and being the victim, or "not involved". The researchers found that individuals in the "bully-victim" and "victim only" groups reported higher rates of bedtime fears, parasomnia, and insomnia than those in the "bully only" and "not involved" groups indicating that directly experiencing bullying may lead to increases in sleep disturbances (Donoghue & Meltzer, 2018).

Long-Term Effects

Swartz and Bhattacharya (2017) noted that in three prior longitudinal cohort studies done by the Epidemiologic Multicenter Child Psychiatric Study in Finland, the Great Smoky Mountains Study in the US, and the National Child Development Study in the UK, victims of bullying in their early to mid-20s showed higher rates of agoraphobia, depression, anxiety, panic disorder and suicidality in comparison to those who have not been bullied in childhood. These individuals are also more likely to receive psychiatric treatment and use psychiatric medications

later in life due to continued psychological distress and mental health issues (Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017). This data is supported by a survey done by Camodeca and Nava (2020) that reported that experiencing bullying in school as either a victim or a bystander was associated with difficulties in emotion regulation in adulthood.

Role of Occupational Therapy in Bullying Prevention

Benefits of Occupational Therapy

The goal of school-based occupational therapists is to promote student participation not only in academic areas but also in non-academic areas. Some non-academic areas of concern include activities of daily living and social participation as reported by a case report by Reeder et al. (2011). A survey done by Goswami (2012) with 6,744 students explained that when children were bullied by other children their age, there was a significant decrease in children's well-being. It was also noted that negative social interactions with peers has a disproportionately greater effect on numerous variables, such as satisfaction in life, mood, illness and stress. A survey reported that occupational therapists try to enable individuals to participate in everyday life by adapting the environment the client is in or providing additional support (Cakmak et al., 2016). If bullying is affecting a child's occupations in the school system, the role of occupational therapy is to reduce adverse social interactions with peers so the child can successfully engage in their desired occupations.

Limitations of Services

Occupational therapy is an effective tool in reducing bullying behaviors in schools, although more education is required by both school-based occupational therapists and other school professionals in order for occupational therapy to reach its full potential. Cahill and Egan (2017) reported that there was a lack of knowledge among school professionals, including psychologists, social workers, and counselors regarding the value of occupational therapy as part of the school mental health team. After learning about the full scope of occupational therapy, these school professionals reported viewing occupational therapists as an important collaborator in school mental health services (Cahill & Egan, 2017). In addition to not feeling supported by other staff, many occupational therapists in the schools reported not addressing bullying due to not feeling confident in their training and abilities regarding how to intervene. Entry-level training and continuing education are necessary to prepare occupational therapy practitioners to handle bullying among students and create effective bullying prevention programs (Njelesani, 2020).

Current Interventions for Bullying

Promotion of Kind Behaviors

Social participation with peers was found to be vital for adolescents to fulfill their basic needs and improve well-being by helping children feel like they belong (Goswami, 2012). It was reported that when children thought their social interactions were conflictual, the children experienced more loneliness which affects children greatly as social isolation negatively affects well-being (Goswami, 2012). Promoting kindness among students may foster social participation leading to fewer feelings of exclusion or loneliness. In a cohort study, Binfet et al. (2016) examined students' perspectives of kind behaviors in the school context using the School Kindness Scale (SKS). The results of this study reported that there was a significant and positive correlation between high scores on the SKS and teacher reports of students' empathy, social skills, and peer acceptance. This indicates that positive development and learning are promoted when students often perceive kindness at school (Binfet et al., 2016).

Impact of Programs

Many anti-bullying programs have been implemented in the school system and show some level of success, including one called Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program (STR) which focuses on the prevention and reduction of bullying by increasing the staff's responsiveness and awareness to help students create social-emotional skills, as well as encourage socially responsible beliefs (Low et al., 2014). The study's findings are consistent with other literature promoting the assumption that having better practices in regards to bullying prevention significantly improves student outcomes in school (Low et al., 2014). School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) have been used as a framework for reducing bullying in schools. SWPBIS programs aim to improve the school environment and increase prosocial behaviors in students by promoting behavioral expectations in schools. The programs typically follow a 3-tier delivery approach; initially, interventions are implemented universally across the school, then secondary interventions focus on specific classrooms, and if further intervention is needed, tertiary interventions are targeted towards specific students (Gage et al, 2019; Waasdorp et al., 2012). A randomized controlled trial conducted by Waasdorp et al. (2012) and a mixed-methods study done by Gage et al. (2019) both analyzed the effect of SWPBIS in schools and found differing results based on who the data was gathered from. Teachers typically reported a positive impact on students including lower rates of bullying and peer rejection following the implementation of the program (Waasdorp et al., 2012). When student perceptions were examined, researchers found that SWPBIS programs may be effective in reducing non-compliant and disruptive behaviors, but there was no significant effect on reducing bullying behaviors (Gage et al., 2019).

Summary

Overall, 35 articles were reviewed and 17 were chosen for further review. The articles included topics on bullying prevention and interventions, effects of social interactions, and the benefits of prosocial behaviors. The following main points were found:

- Bullying has been shown to have both long-term and short-term effects on its victims. The effects of bullying range from short-term, school absences, to long-term mental health issues. Therefore prevention at an early age leads to a more beneficial outcome (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2015; Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017).
- Social interactions play a big role in the well-being of children. Children are engaged in social interactions every day and negative interactions can greatly affect the child's well-being as well as the occupations in which they engage (Torrente et al., 2014).
- Kindness within schools leads to more positive development in children and programs that focus on promoting prosocial behaviors may increase peer inclusion and decrease bullying behaviors (Binfet et al. 2016; Waasdorp et al. 2012).

The aim of researching these topics was to examine the literature regarding using prosocial behaviors in school-aged adolescents to reduce bullying behaviors. A review of the research indicated that there was not enough evidence to determine whether or not using prosocial behaviors is effective in the prevention of bullying.

Clinical Bottom Line

To what degree does promoting and instilling kind behaviors in school-aged adolescents through social and peer interactions reduce bullying behaviors?

While there is a variety of literature that supports the implementation of anti-bullying programs in general, there is not enough research to conclusively demonstrate the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs that specifically focus on the promotion of prosocial behaviors. To

understand the effects of bullying on children, the PEO model was used to analyze the transactional relationship between the person, environment, and occupation (Baptiste, 2017). Adolescents' lives are affected in numerous ways daily, so it is important to consider how contextual aspects of the school and home, including social relationships and the physical environment, interact with personal factors of the individual and occupational performance when creating bullying prevention interventions (Carney et al., 2018; Goswami, 2012; Low et al., 2014). Preventing and eliminating bullying behaviors early is extremely important because bullying has shown to have both long-term and short-term effects on victims, including increased avoidant behaviors, disrupted sleep patterns, struggles with emotional regulation, and experiences of psychological distress and mental health issues later in life (Camodeca & Nava, 2020; Donoghue & Meltzer, 2018; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2015; Hutzel & Payne, 2012; Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017).

After thoroughly researching the area of interest, it was discovered that there is a lot of information regarding how positive and negative social relationships affect bullying, as well as information on school-wide interventions that are used to prevent bullying. Adverse peer relationships and bullying were found to consistently correlate with decreased well-being while using kind behaviors in social interactions with peers typically promoted well-being and deferred aggression and bullying behaviors in adolescents (Caprara et al., 2014; Gowsami, 2012; Torrente et al., 2014). Of the articles examining school-wide prosocial behavior interventions, not enough data was provided to conclude whether or not they were effective, as bullying is a dynamic pattern of negative behaviors that cannot effectively be addressed in the same format as other problem behaviors, such as noncompliance or disruptive behavior (Gage et al. 2019; Low et al., 2014; Waasdorp et al., 2012).

The literature that has been analyzed will be useful for guiding the practice of occupational therapists in the school system. The role of occupational therapy in the school system is to promote student participation in both academic and non-academic activities by providing support, teaching new techniques or methods, or adapting the environment (Cakmak et al., 2016; Reeder et al., 2011). Occupational therapy intervention in relation to bullying prevention can occur in different forms. Occupational therapists may want to try implementing a program to work with students one-on-one or in small groups to promote the use of positive behaviors towards their peers. There are few school-wide programs that focus solely on promoting prosocial and kind behaviors among adolescents; therefore, occupational therapists should review aspects of anti-bullying programs that were beneficial and integrate them to create a new program. During this process, occupational therapists should collaborate with other school professionals and consider the perspectives of both students and teachers in order to produce a well-rounded program (Cahill & Egan, 2017; Gage et al., 2019; Waasdorp et al., 2012). Improving existing anti-bullying programs by synthesizing different elements that were previously successful will motivate students to exhibit prosocial behaviors, consequently reducing bullying behaviors.

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