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Kara M. McGoey

Allison Aberson

Bridget Green

Seana Bandi Stewart

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Abstract

Early childhood is an essential time for social-emotional learning and the development of appropriate peer interactions. Preschool children also begin to use more physical and verbal forms of aggression and bullying within their relationships with peers. The Building Foundations for Friendship (BFF) curriculum was designed to teach preschool-aged children appropriate social skills to prevent bullying. The topics discussed in this curriculum include developing friendship skills, identifying various peer interactions, and learning how to appropriately respond to a peer's aggressive behavior. It was hypothesized that preschool students' social skills and social behavior would improve after implementation of the BFF curriculum. The participants in this study included 79 preschool students between the ages of 3 and 6. Data were collected pre- and post-intervention. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in social skills and a decrease in problem behavior following intervention. There was not a statistically significant decrease in relational or overt aggression. Implications of the results and future directions are discussed.

The early childhood years are a critical period for social-emotional development. Social and emotional learning (SEL) was defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as: an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to

develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020).

SEL involves implementing evidence-based practices within an educational setting to enhance social, emotional, and cognitive growth. CASEL purposefully used the term learning as a way to reflect that the acquisition and establishment of these skills in children is a long-term process (Durlak et al., 2015).

In the CASEL model, SEL is comprised of five main behavioral, cognitive, and affective competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Like other learning approaches, each of these competency domains is thought to develop early in life and build upon the integration of a student's interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The five competencies are supported by four critical settings in a person's life: classrooms, schools, families and caregivers, and communities (CASEL, 2020). Thus, early childhood classrooms play an integral role in the development and promotion of SEL.

Social interactions within a classroom setting are crucial to SEL. Children who are socially competent exhibit prosocial behavior by forming reciprocal friendships, displaying emotions that are responsive to group norms, and forming a balance between their needs and the needs of others. Friendships promote positive and healthy social-emotional development by providing an avenue to practice social-emotional skills and provide and receive feedback (Pressley & McCormick, 2006). When children typically enter preschool around the age of 3, they begin to prefer certain children over others. As these specific friendships begin to form, different patterns of social interaction start forming as well (Pressley & McCormick, 2006).

Unfortunately, young preschool children can also display physical and relational aggression (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Research

has supported a relationship between a child's diminished ability to regulate emotions and the increased likelihood of exhibiting relational and physical aggression. These findings further reveal that emotion dysregulation in childhood is a significant risk factor for later episodes of relational and physical aggression (Röll et al., 2012). As a result, the ability of young children to regulate their behaviors and emotions may influence their ability to express themselves without physical or relational aggression in social contexts, thus furthering the argument for implementing specific SEL in the preschool classroom.

The display of physical and relational aggression in early childhood can have other severe consequences extending into adolescence and adulthood. Research has revealed that children who have a strong tendency to be aggressive are less likely to maintain friendships, and are more likely to be rejected by their peers (Ettekal & Ladd, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2003). Children who were rejected early in their academic career had poor perceptions of school, higher levels of school avoidance, and low performance levels throughout the year (Ladd, 1990). Furthermore, children who have experienced rejection are more likely to become future targets of aggression. Difficulties forming and maintaining peer relationships in childhood are also associated with academic difficulties, criminal behavior, and mental health problems later in life (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). Moreover, children who display serious conduct problems, including aggression, can develop difficulties with self-help skills, socialization, and emotional regulation (McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2011).

Bullying in Early Childhood

Not all aggressive acts are forms of bullying. Bullying is typically defined as repeated aggressive actions performed by a domineering person toward a more vulnerable individual. Bullying has detrimental long-term effects for both the bully and the victim. Research has shown that bullying behavior is present and detrimental in young children as well. However, bullying in early childhood looks considerably different than in older children (Saracho, 2017). Often

preschool children engage in bullying behaviors such as exclusion during play, calling names, and threats of betrayal of friendship. Definitions of bullying in early childhood should include broad descriptions of behavior, to encompass the initial risky but not persistent or intense forms of bullying behavior often seen in preschool classrooms.

Researchers have begun to identify the complexity of preschool bullying. This complexity is due to young individuals transitioning into different roles as the bully, victim, bystander, or bully-victim (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Saracho, 2017) and whether the individuals meet the criteria of participating in bullying behaviors (Olweus, 1993). In preschool, most bullies show aggression towards peers through verbal (e.g., hurtful comments), and physical actions (e.g., physical aggression). Bully-victims are preschool students victimized by their peers who later become aggressive and impulsive within their friend group (Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Preschool children fulfill interchanging roles during bullying scenarios that are both predominant and peripheral. Like older children, bullies and victims in preschool have poor school adjustment, behavior problems, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive thoughts, and are often rejected later in school. Young bullies are at risk for future anti-social behavior and criminal acts (Jenkins et al., 2017; Saracho, 2017).

The complexity and detrimental effects of bullying in early childhood require that early childhood professionals emphasize the importance of developing social skills needed by the bully, victim, bully-victim, and defender to create and maintain friendships and reduce isolation from peers (Saracho, 2017). However, it is not sufficient to intervene with bullies and victims. Direct, explicit, and intentional teaching of prosocial behaviors and responses to bullying behavior is imperative (Jenkins et al., 2017). SEL curricula must address bullying with a developmentally appropriate and feasible approach for early childhood populations. Few programs exist that address this need.

The most widely used programs for young children are (a) Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 1993), (b) Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program (Committee for Children, 2005), (c) Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School (Alsaker, 2004), and (d) Second Step: A Bullying Prevention Program (Committee for Children, 2015; Saracho, 2017). The first three programs were designed for elementary age children, and the fourth was designed for ages 4 to 14. These common programs were designed for older children, and thus may not be developmentally appropriate or match the classroom environment and schedule of a preschool classroom. Programming designed with the preschool child and classroom in mind is needed to set the foundation and readiness for elementary programming.

Ostrov and colleagues (2015) created the Early Childhood Friendship Project as a bullying education and prevention program for preschool children. The Early Childhood Friendship Project is an eight-week program designed to be developmentally appropriate and used puppets, active engagement, and reinforcement throughout the classroom (Ostrov et. al., 2015). Evaluation of the program indicated that relational aggression was reduced in the intervention group compared to the control group. The study also found that relational and physical aggression were reduced for girls in the intervention group when compared to the control group girls. While the results of this program were positive, additional recommendations were made for future research. First, the program was initially implemented in NAEYC accredited preschools, which ensured high quality teaching and teacher-student interactions. The authors suggested that the program should also be tested in community preschools that may struggle with maintaining accreditation for various reasons. In addition, the study trained the teachers but did not include teacher support during the intervention.

This study investigated a developmentally-appropriate bullying prevention program for use in the early childhood classroom. In

addition, the lessons and materials were created to be accessible, inexpensive, and easy to learn so that all early childhood centers could benefit from the program. The Building Foundations for Friendship (BFF) curriculum was developed to provide direct, explicit teaching to encourage prosocial behavior and guide bullying victims in responding appropriately to bullies. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (a) Does the BFF curriculum increase prosocial behaviors (social skills, prosocial behavior), and decease problem behaviors (relational aggression, overt aggression, problem behaviors), in preschool children? and (b) Will teachers find the BFF curriculum acceptable? It was hypothesized that the curriculum would improve social skills and decrease the problem behaviors of preschool children and that teachers would find the curriculum acceptable.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study included 79 preschool children, 48 males and 31 females, across seven classrooms within four different early childhood centers in the southwest region of Pennsylvania. All children were enrolled in preschool at least one day per week and were between the ages of 3 and 6 years. Participants constituted a diverse sample of ethnic and socioeconomic groups that was representative of the surrounding area in which the study was conducted. All children at the center were asked to participate. One lead teacher per classroom also participated in this study by implementing the curriculum once a week for eight weeks.

Measures

The Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales-Teacher Form (SSiS; Gresham & Elliot, 2008) was used to determine participants' social behaviors in the preschool classroom as observed by the classroom teacher. The SSIS uses a four-point scale ranging from "never" to "almost always" to assess two distinct scales: the

Social Skills scale and the Problem Behavior scale. The Social Skills scale is composed of 46 items organized into seven subscales (communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, self-control), and a total Social Skills composite score. The Problem Behavior scale contains a total of 24 items that yield five subscales: externalizing, bullying, hyperactive-inattentive, internalizing, and autistic behavior, as well as a composite Problem Behaviors score. The teacher form also includes an Academic Competence Scale that assesses reading and math performance as well as motivation, parental support, and overall cognitive functioning. This scale is normed on elementary and secondary students and, as such, was not used in this study. The SSIS demonstrates high test-retest reliability coefficients of .82 for the Social Skills scale and .83 for the Problem Behaviors scale. There is moderate interrater reliability, with a coefficient of .68 on the Social Skills scale and .61 on the Problem Behavior scale. The SSIS also demonstrates moderate psychometric validity with median convergent validity coefficients at .40 for 3- to 5-year-olds and median discriminant validity coefficients at .34 for 3- to 5-year-olds. Data gathered via the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales-Teacher Form (SSiS) rating forms were analyzed for change from pre-intervention ratings to post-intervention ratings. The SSiS provides a measure of social behaviors in the preschool classroom as observed by the classroom teacher. For all preschool classrooms, data were analyzed for change from pre-intervention to post-intervention using a paired samples t-test. Per the research questions and hypothesis, the researchers analyzed the data to determine increase in observed social skills.

The Preschool Social Behavior Scale (PSBS; Crick et al., 1997) was used to assess social behavior in preschool-age children through the observations by the classroom teachers. The measure utilizes 23 items on a five-point Likert scale to address the teachers' perceptions of the individual child's aggressive and prosocial behaviors. The scale response anchors range from "never" to "almost always." The PSBS

provides a measure of prosocial as well as aggressive behaviors, as observed by the classroom teacher. A PSBS was completed for each child by the same classroom teacher prior to the intervention and when the intervention was complete. For all preschool classrooms, data were analyzed for change from pre-intervention to post-intervention using a paired samples t-test.

The Behavior Intervention Rating Scale-Teacher Version (BIRS-T; Elliott & Treuting, 1991) was utilized to address this intervention's acceptability among classroom teachers. This questionnaire is a 24-item measure regarding the teacher's attitudes of the appropriateness of the implemented intervention. An example of a statement on this measure is "I like the procedures used in this intervention." Teachers are asked to circle a number on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Factor analysis on the BIRS-T has yielded three distinct factors: acceptability, effectiveness, and time needed to implement the intervention. All three scales of this measure exhibit strong reliability with coefficient alpha's of .97, .92, and .87, respectively. Data gathered regarding the classroom teachers' acceptability of this intervention was collected post-intervention.

Procedure

Once all permission and consent forms were obtained, the classroom teachers completed the SSIS and PSBS for each participant in the classroom. Then, implementation of BFF began in the classroom. Sessions occurred once per week for eight weeks and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. All of the materials needed for this study, such as pictures, books, and animal puppets, were provided at no cost. The materials were left with the early childhood centers to encourage the generalization of the prosocial skills learned in the curriculum. A school psychology graduate student observed approximately 75% of the sessions conducted in each setting to ensure treatment fidelity to the BFF curriculum. Treatment fidelity was 100%.

BFF Curriculum

BFF curriculum addressed behaviors associated with relational aggression as it pertains to preschool-age children. The topics discussed in these lessons included developing friendship skills, identifying types of peer interactions, and learning how to respond to a peer's relationally aggressive behavior. The curriculum also included activities that are developmentally appropriate for early childhood and can easily be incorporated into typical aspects of a preschool classroom. Animal puppets, as well as pictures of the scenarios, were utilized throughout the intervention to engage children as well as help them understand the material. Concrete examples and stories were used throughout the curriculum to promote the acquisition and generalization of the concepts taught in the curriculum. Each session began and ended with a friendship song to maintain consistency across sessions, and to begin and end on positive notes. The curriculum also included phrases and activities that the teachers could easily embed into the daily routines to reinforce learned concepts or skills throughout the day.

In session one of the BFF curriculum, participants began by learning the opening and closing friendship songs. This lesson was primarily an introduction to the primary puppet character and narrator. Participants also began discussing what they liked to do with their friends. Session two began by discussing how the students would define "a good friend." After a few examples, the teacher then read a book about friendship to the participants. Following the book's reading, the teacher asked the participants to discuss how the characters in the books were each being a friend.

In session three, participants discussed being a kind friend and worked together to create a list of classroom rules for being a kind friend. The participants were encouraged to use their ideas and to be creative in making this list. Next, three short stories were presented in which a character breaks a friendship rule. Participants worked together to discuss and identify which friendship classroom rule was broken in each of the stories. The rules were posted

throughout the preschool center to remind the children of these rules for the remainder of the school year. They were also reviewed in each session by the teachers to increase the participants' mastery.

Sessions four, five, and six all followed a similar structure. The puppet characters shared their own friendship story and asked for advice from the participants. Session four started with an aggressive character who responds to relationally aggressive peers in physically aggressive ways. Session five introduced a passive character who responded to relational aggression by being passive and withdrawn. In session six, the participants were introduced to an assertive character, who responded to relationally aggressive peers by being appropriately assertive. After the stories, participants worked together to identify which friendships rules were broken in each scenario.

Similar strategies from the previous three sessions were maintained in session seven. Participants were presented with more scenarios and were asked to discuss ways to respond to a relationally aggressive peer. This lesson aimed to increase the participants' ability to generalize and use the assertive strategies that were previously learned by applying them to the new friendship scenarios. Lesson eight, the final session, was described as a celebration of friendship and aimed to review what had been taught thus far about friendship.

After the conclusion of the BFF curriculum, the teachers again completed the SSIS and PSBS for each participant in the classroom. The teachers also completed the BIRS-T. Measures were completed within two weeks after the last session.

Results

Pre- and post t-test measures were analyzed using paired sample t-tests for each dependent measure. Measures with missing data were excluded from analysis. Paired sample t-test results indicated significant differences in teachers' ratings between pre-intervention and post-intervention for observed social skills (p= .00) and problem behaviors (p = .00) as rated by the SSIS (see Table 1). The effect size for the change in social skills was .41 and the effect size for the change in problem behavior was .24. Thus, it was determined that teachers' ratings were significantly higher for observed social skills of the preschool children following participation in the program. Regarding observed problem behaviors, ratings were significantly lower for the preschool children following participation in the program. The PSBS indicated a statistically significant increase in scores for the observed depressed affect of the preschool children following participation in the program; however, the PSBS uses three items to rate depressed affect, so this result should be interpreted with caution. No significant differences were found between pre-intervention and post-intervention for observed relational aggression, overt physical aggression, and prosocial behaviors of the preschool children as rated on the PSBS.

The data from the BIRS-T were reviewed qualitatively for general feedback from the teachers and any criticisms or concerns of this intervention. Results revealed that while two teachers rated the intervention as neutral, (scores of 3 for every item on a 1 to 6 scale), the remainder of the teachers (n=5) either agreed or strongly agreed that the intervention was (a) acceptable for the child's problem behavior, (b) appropriate for a variety of children, (c) would prove effective in changing the child's problem behavior, and (d) an intervention the teacher would recommend to other teachers. No comments or concerns were provided.

Table 1
Paired sample t test results for pre- and post-measures in each group

	Mean	SD	SE Mean	Paired t test			Effect Size
				t value	df	Sig (two-tailed)	
Relational Aggression	.04	3.89	.44	.09	78	.93	NA
Overt Aggression	.67	3.39	.38	1.76	78	.08	NA
Depressed Affect	-.51	1.66	.19	-2.72	78	.01*	NA
Prosocial Behavior	.14	2.74	.31	.45	78	.65	NA
Social Skills	-5.99	10.85	1.26	-4.75	73	.00*	.41
Problem Behavior	3.96	10.10	1.17	3.37	73	.00*	.24

Note. *Significant at the .01 level*

Discussion

For many children, preschool is where they first learn how to effectively engage socially and emotionally with their peers and, ultimately, develop friendships. However, this is also a period when children develop behaviors that lead to physical and verbal aggression towards peers (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Therefore, there is an immediate need for teachers to target the social and emotional skills in the preschool classroom (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Preschool provides multiple occasions to support SEL for students aged 3-5 years, to ensure that they understand and have opportunities to implement prosocial behaviors with their peers in the classroom. The BFF curriculum supported these opportunities and provided educators a unique method to target and help children develop social and emotional needs in order to alleviate bullying later in school, thus, supporting past recommendations by Jenkins et al. (2017). In the current study, teachers who used the BFF curriculum reported an increase in social skills observed in their classrooms and decreased problem behaviors by their students.

The effect size of the changes was small to moderate; however, BFF was designed as a prevention program, thus, the small to moderate effect sizes should be seen as notable. One would expect the foundational skills learned within the BFF program to be expanded upon in elementary school, furthering the possible effect of bullying prevention programs. The curriculum was implemented with the entire class which resulted in a low base-rate of bullying and aggressive behaviors, indicating that there was not room for great change in aggressive behavior. The growth of observed prosocial behaviors is an important finding, as improving prosocial skills early, such as in preschool and kindergarten, can reduce bullying experienced in middle school (Saracho, 2017).

While some bullying prevention programs decrease bullying behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Olweus, 1993), few target the cognitive and developmental periods to appropriately support preschool students' social and emotional skills (Saracho, 2017). However, the BFF curriculum was designed to be developmentally appropriate and meet the cognitive and emotional needs of children aged 3-5. In addition, the curriculum was specifically designed to fit into the typical preschool daily schedule. The BFF curriculum provided teachers with manipulatives, (e.g., puppets, pictures), so that the children could learn through specific scenarios that highlighted age-appropriate prosocial behavior. These lessons allowed the teachers' instruction to be purposeful and precise when discussing each topic. Further, the curriculum enabled the students to understand a variety of roles (e.g., bully, bystander) throughout the bullying-dynamic and how these roles may hurt the development of friendships.

In the BFF curriculum, three characters played specific roles to help participants understand the bully, victim, bully-victim, and defender. Angry Alligator was aggressive to peers, Shy-Squirrel was passive and did not support peers, and Cool Confident Cat taught students how to appropriately respond during the bullying dynamic. In this study, the teachers reported that these characters

helped children understand the bully, victim, and bully-victim behaviors that impacted friendships. The teachers also stated that the characters supported students' learning of prosocial skills relating to friendships, and developed opportunities for students to change past maladaptive behaviors. Finally, participants stated that the characters created scenarios that allowed students to practice moving away from a peripheral role in the bullying dynamic (e.g., providing positive feedback to the bully or offering no input to the bully or victim), and taking on the defender's role in assisting in the elimination of bullying. Since the BFF program used Cool Confident Cat to demonstrate how to be a defender during the bullying event, the curriculum provided preschool students with opportunities to practice prosocial behaviors that could benefit the classroom community. Research has shown that the benefit for a victim of having a defender in a preschool classroom decreases anxiety and depression-like symptoms and promotes positive social networks (Sainio et al., 2011; Vlachou et al., 2013). Teachers must begin to implement opportunities to support social and emotional development in order to lessen the occurrence of bullying in their preschool classrooms.

Implications for Practitioners

SEL is key to early education. Many states have standards requiring early education programs to promote positive social and emotional development. Preschool teachers need support in purposefully using activities such as circle time to implement and practice social skill development. Further, teachers need to receive training on promoting prosocial skills through a universal design for learning (UDL) framework to ensure all learners understand the lessons.

Prosocial skills can alleviate classroom emotional and behavioral concerns that arise in preschool. The prevalence of mental health disabilities is increasing in school settings, and teachers may not have the skills needed to deal with the diverse emotional needs

of young children. School psychologists and preschool teachers should work together to create trainings that targets preschool students' mental health, social, and behavior needs. These trainings can identify how teachers can use time during their classes to reinforce specific social, behavioral, and language skills which in turn decreases bullying (Horowitz et al., 2006; Jenkins et al., 2017).

Future Research

This initial validation of the BFF curriculum yielded many recommendations for future research. First, the study should be replicated in multiple classrooms across different regions to obtain a larger, more diverse sample of children and educators. Ideally, the study would be implemented to collect information regarding teachers' gender, education level, and age to see if there is any moderating effect on observed social, behavior, and emotions observed in a variety of classrooms.

A second recommendation would be to implement the study across multiple preschool classrooms, with some classrooms identified as a control group and the remaining receiving the BFF curriculum. Since the BFF curriculum is a prevention method to teach prosocial skills, the researchers did not collect data on maturation. Implementing the curriculum in multiple preschools during the school year with one classroom as a control group would provide insight on potential long-term effects on SEL. Furthermore, this would provide an opportunity to understand maturation related to bullying prevention programs and long-term social and emotional skills.

A third recommendation involves the implementation of the BFF curriculum in an inclusive preschool classroom. There is a need to understand how students who have difficulty interpreting social, emotional, and behavioral cues (i.e., students with autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disabilities) may benefit from conversations during and after each lesson. These students with disabilities may benefit from the curriculum as a preventative barrier for learned

maladaptive isolating behaviors. Furthermore, future research needs to identify how this program provides students with disabilities with specific language skills to have conversations about perceived protection at school to ensure all students are safe.

Fourth, future research needs to identify how the program provides supports to the bystander. In preschool bullying, there is a paucity of research regarding the power of the bystander role in the bullying dynamic and how often preschoolers switch from the aggressor role of bullying to the observer (Vlachou et al., 2013). Repo and Sajaniemi (2015) emphasized the importance of teachers targeting and minimizing preschool bullying by paying particular attention to those who partake in peripheral bullying roles.

Limitations

Four overarching limitations emerged from the study. First, there were only seven preschool classrooms involved in this study. Since most teachers were female, there could be a misrepresentation of bullying behaviors due to gender-related perceptions on bullying (Cameron & Kovac, 2016). Second, while 79 preschool students could participate, some students were only enrolled one day per week, which could hinder the opportunity for the student to learn from the BFF program.. Finally, the researchers did not collect data on teacher bias. Since the teachers were implementing the curriculum and also reporting on observation data from their classrooms, they could have reported higher social skills because they expected and knew what to look for based on the examples in the curriculum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SEL is essential to preschool. Bullying in preschool may be manifested differently than bullying seen in late elementary and middle schools. Therefore, to effectively address bullying in preschool, interventions should identify complex barriers (e.g., mental health needs, developmentally appropriate programs, perception of bullying) to ensure students' social and emotional

development. Without addressing the need for positive supports in early childhood, there is an increased risk of maladaptive behaviors later in school (Espelage & Aisado, 2001; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

Few programs offer targeted, developmentally appropriate support to facilitate prosocial behaviors in preschool students. The BFF curriculum provided multiple means of representation to ensure that teachers targeted preschool aggression and promoted positive emotional and social health. This study and the BFF curriculum contribute to the field by allowing preschool students to identify unhealthy behaviors in friendships through specific scenarios and clearly define and explain their perceptions of bullying. This study demonstrates the importance of age-appropriate activities to ensure all students develop social and emotional skills for future academic success.

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