

Most bullying incidents happen when peers are present. The KiVa program not only trains teachers, but also contains effective strategies to change bystanders into defenders.

4

Making bullying prevention a priority in Finnish schools: The KiVa antibullying program

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AS IN MANY other societies, bullying has been a big concern in Finland for several decades. For many years, there was a persistent belief that the problem could be tackled by legislative changes (requiring schools to develop their own action plans against bullying) or by a commitment of school personnel to intervene immediately whenever they see bullying taking place (zero tolerance). It seems, however, that adults working in schools need more concrete tools for bullying prevention work with children and youth, just as they need clear guidelines to intervene when bullying is detected. It is not enough to do something: there is now a rich body of evidence on the mechanisms of bullying, and this knowledge must be incorporated in antibullying measures in order for them to be effective.

In 2006, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture contracted with the University of Turku concerning the development and evaluation of an antibullying program that could be implemented widely in Finnish comprehensive schools. The program,

KiVa (an acronym for *Kiusaamista Vastaan*, “against bullying”; the Finnish adjective *kiva* also means “nice”), was developed and evaluated at the University of Turku, in collaboration between the Department of Psychology and the Centre for Learning Research. The KiVa program was developed for schools providing comprehensive education (grades 1 to 9 in the Finnish school system, with students between about seven and fifteen years old). The first phase of the KiVa project (from 2006 to 2009) included the development of the program (three versions for different grade levels), training school personnel during the piloting period, and a large-scale evaluation study. The diffusion of the KiVa program in Finnish schools at large started in 2009, and about 82 percent of Finnish comprehensive schools are implementing it now. This article provides an overview of the KiVa antibullying program and its implementation and reviews findings concerning its effectiveness.

Research background and goals of KiVa

The KiVa antibullying program is well grounded in research. It is based on decades of research done by our group in Finland and other researchers from around the world. The program is predicated on the idea that how peer bystanders, who are neither bullies nor victims, react when witnessing bullying is crucial for either maintaining bullying or putting an end to it.

Unlike many antisocial acts such as shoplifting or substance use, in which youth engage mostly in their free time together with their friends, much of the bullying takes place on school playgrounds and is witnessed by relatively large audiences of peers.¹ Unfortunately, peer witnesses often behave in ways that encourage the bully and provide social rewards to him or her rather than taking sides with the victim.² Reinforcement of the bully may involve displays of approval (smiling, laughing along) or direct verbal incitements.³ Even subtle positive feedback by nonverbal cues can be rewarding for the children doing the bullying. Apart from bullying incidents as such, it might become normative in the peer

group to treat the victimized child in a mean way; it is perceived “normal” that he or she is excluded from activities, constantly laughed at, or just ignored. Even if most children and youth think that bullying is wrong, they rarely express such private attitudes in public, especially when the perpetrator of bullying is a high-status peer.

The bystanders’ behaviors carry consequences for the targets of bullying, as well as for the children engaging in bullying. For the targets, the most painful experience involved in being bullied is not necessarily the attacks by one or two mean kids, but the perception that the whole group is against them: no one seems to care about their pain. Research evidence shows that victims who are supported or defended even by a single classmate are less depressed and anxious, have higher self-esteem, and are less rejected by their peers than victims without defenders.⁴

When others do nothing to support the victim or laugh when bullying occurs, they socially reward those doing the bullying, who are more likely to continue their mean acts. It has been demonstrated that bullying behavior occurs more frequently in classrooms where reinforcing is common and few children take sides with the victims.⁵ Furthermore, individual risk factors such as social anxiety are more likely to be associated with victimization in classrooms where reinforcing the bully is normative.⁶

An important message from these studies is that in order to reduce victimization, it is not necessary to somehow make the victims “less vulnerable.” And the behavior of the aggressive bullies might be difficult to change directly if the peer context is ignored: the perpetrators of bullying are often successful in gaining prestige.⁷ Influencing the behaviors of classmates can reduce the social rewards that the bullies gain and, consequently, their motivation to bully in the first place.

Researchers in the field now share the view that influencing peer bystanders is a key to effective and sustainable bullying interventions.⁸ In the KiVa antibullying program, this idea is translated into concrete tools that help adults, and children and youth themselves, to tackle bullying in a systematic way.

Program elements and implementation model

The aims of the KiVa antibullying program are to put an end to ongoing bullying, prevent the emergence of new bully-victim relationships, and minimize the negative consequences of victimization. The focus is on influencing the peer bystanders, who are neither bullies nor victims, to make them show that they are against bullying and to make them support the victim rather than encourage the bully.

KiVa is a whole-school program and thus requires the commitment of all personnel. KiVa is not meant to be a project that lasts for a certain period of time and then ends. It is meant to become part of the school's ongoing antibullying efforts. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the implementation of the KiVa program during one school year (in Finland, from mid-August to the end of May).

KiVa involves several universal actions, such as student lessons (primary school) and themes containing several lessons (secondary school), accompanied by virtual learning environments that are closely connected to their contents. During the evaluation study (a randomized controlled trial) of KiVa, the three versions of KiVa student lessons and themes were delivered in grades 1 to 3, 4 to 6, and 7 to 9. For continuing implementation of KiVa, we recommend that at the primary school level, student lessons are delivered in the first and fourth grades. There are ten double lessons (a double lesson lasts ninety minutes) for both of these grade levels. In lower secondary and middle school, the four themes are recommended to be targeted at seventh graders. A student in a KiVa school will thus attend the lessons and themes three times during his or her compulsory education: first at the beginning of the school career, then in grade 4, and for the last time in grade 7, right after the middle school transition.

The lessons and themes, carried out by the classroom teacher, involve discussion, group work, short films about bullying, and role-play exercises. The contents of the lessons proceed from more general topics, such as emotions, the importance of respect in

Table 4.1. Implementation of the KiVa antibullying program during one school year

<i>Month</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>All cases of bullying coming to attention</i>
August	Staff meeting	Kick-off (all students), lesson 1 (grades 1 and 4)	Newsletters to homes	Immediate response to bullying cases and follow-up (KiVa team plus classroom teacher)
September		Lesson 2 (grades 1 and 4), theme 1 (grade 7)	Back-to-school night for parents	
October		Lesson 3 (grades 1 and 4)		
November		Lesson 4 (grades 1 and 4), theme 2 (grade 7)		
December		Lesson 5 (grades 1 and 4)		
January		Lesson 6 (grades 1 and 4), theme 3 (grade 7)		
February		Lesson 7 (grades 1 and 4)		
March		Lesson 8 (grades 1 and 4), theme 4 (grade 7)		
April		Lesson 9 (grades 1 and 4)		
May		Lesson 10 (grades 1 and 4), KiVa student survey (all grades)		

relationships, and group pressure, to bullying and its mechanisms and consequences. Several lessons (themes) concern the role of the group in either maintaining bullying or putting an end to it. The group exercises involve, among other things, brainstorming ways to support and help the bullied victims and practicing these skills. Studies have shown that empathy toward the victimized peers, as well as self-efficacy to defend and support them, are important characteristics that should be promoted if we want to make defending more common.⁹ The lessons and themes are accompanied with virtual learning environments, that is, antibullying computer games for grades 1 and 4 and an online environment called “KiVa Street” for grade 7. Their purpose is to motivate students and enhance their learning process.

We believe that specific actions are also needed to tackle the cases of bullying that come to the attention of school personnel. In KiVa, the indicated actions are effectuated by school KiVa teams, together with classroom teachers. The KiVa team consists of three teachers (or other school personnel) in each participating school, whose main task is to tackle, with the classroom teachers, the cases of bullying that come to their attention. This happens through a set of individual and group discussions that one or two team members go through with the victim and with the bullies and systematic follow-up meetings. In addition to these discussions, the classroom teacher arranges a meeting with two to four selected classmates in order to encourage them to support the victimized child. The teacher manuals include detailed guidelines about how the discussions are carried through.

To make KiVa visible for all students and personnel in the school, the program materials include highly visible vests for teachers who are monitoring recess. The highly visible vests signal that bullying is taken seriously in the school. There are also posters that can be hung on classroom or school corridor walls to remind everyone about KiVa. For parents, an information leaflet is sent to each home at the beginning of the school year, presentation slides are used at back-to-school night for parents, and a parents’ Web site provides information about bullying and advice

concerning what parents can do to help reduce the problem or even prevent it.

Before the beginning of implementation, school personnel are provided with two days of face-to-face training. Those participating in the training then pass on to others in their school what they have learned. The recommended time for face-to-face training is the spring term preceding implementation, which begins in the fall. In addition to face-to-face training, KiVa offers an online training package for those who were unable to participate in the face-to-face training, new personnel in schools already implementing KiVa, and new schools adopting the program. The online training content is similar to that of the face-to-face training. The KiVa Web site also has a discussion forum where personnel of KiVa schools can share ideas, experiences, and challenges concerning program implementation.

There is an annual online survey to be filled out by the students and personnel of KiVa schools, providing feedback to schools regarding their situation (for example, the prevalence of bullied students and their perpetrators) and their level of implementation of the KiVa program. Thus, schools can compare their situation to previous years, as well as to the situation of other schools. Students respond to the survey for the first time in the spring preceding implementation and then at the same time every year. School personnel start answering the survey after the first year of implementation.

Good coordination is essential. Therefore, each school should appoint a person in charge of the implementation of KiVa. She or he is familiarized with the program as a whole, coordinates the implementation, and assists when needed in other matters related to the program. In the fall when implementation begins, schools organize their own staff meeting where everyone is informed about KiVa, and there is a kick-off session for all students. Newsletters are sent to KiVa schools four times a year with reminders about important aspects of implementation, acknowledging schools for their efforts and serving as a motivator. All registered KiVa schools are provided with quality recommendations—

guidelines that help schools monitor their implementation of the KiVa program. Finally, in 2010, we started organizing biannual KiVa days, a two-day conference where the personnel from KiVa schools can hear about the latest research based on KiVa data, get further training, and share their experiences and outcomes.

Because KiVa includes both preventive and interceptive elements, it works for very different schools and classes and for bullying cases that have emerged recently as well as those that have lasted longer. The preconditions for implementation include personnel who are committed enough to deliver the universal actions and a minimum of three people who are motivated to work on a school team handling the program. The principal's role is important in ensuring resources and providing support for high-quality implementation.¹⁰

Evaluation results

Program evaluation was considered a central part of the KiVa project from the beginning. A randomized control design was used to evaluate program effects. Altogether 234 schools representing all provinces in mainland Finland (and both Finnish- and Swedish-speaking schools) were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions (twenty-eight thousand students were involved).

KiVa data are longitudinal, containing three assessment points during a one-year period: the pretest, the evaluation after five months of intervention, and the evaluation after nine to ten months of intervention. At each assessment, students logged in to the Web-based questionnaire (developed specifically for the KiVa project) using their passwords. Thus, individual students, as well as whole classrooms and schools, could be followed over time. In addition, we have continued a follow-up of one cohort (children who were in the fourth grade during the first phase of program evaluation in 2007–2008) in order to examine the long-term psychosocial and academic adjustment of victims and bullies who

remained in their roles despite the KiVa intervention versus those who benefited from the intervention.

KiVa data are unique not only in the number of participants but also in the wealth of factors assessed. Besides bullying and victimization, the data contain information about children's and adolescents' family structure, possible immigrant status, school and class atmosphere, school motivation and well-being, learning outcomes, peer acceptance and rejection, friendships, peer networks, self-esteem and generalized perception of peers, and social-emotional problems such as social anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Self-reports, peer reports, and dyadic questions are used.

Besides student questionnaires, teacher reports regarding their attitudes, self-efficacy, and efforts to tackle bullying, as well as information regarding their students (for example, about learning difficulties and special educational needs), have been collected. Furthermore, teachers have provided us with detailed data on the implementation of the KiVa program, enabling us to study how the implementation varies across schools, which teacher- and school-related factors explain this variation, and how differences in implementation are reflected in program effects.

The findings from the evaluation studies of KiVa have been reported in numerous empirical studies. The main effects of the program after one school year (nine months) of implementation have been rigorously evaluated, first in a randomized controlled trial and later during the broad nationwide rollout.¹¹

In the randomized controlled trial, KiVa was found to reduce bullying and victimization significantly at primary school levels 1 to 6.¹² In grades 7 to 9 the effects were more mixed, and they seemed to depend on gender (larger effects among boys) and the proportion of boys in the classroom, so that even among girls, larger effects were in many cases found in classrooms with higher proportions of boys.¹³ The average effect sizes across all grade levels, with odds ratios of 1.28 (victimization) and 1.30 (bullying), are clearly larger than effect sizes from other bullying intervention studies using a similar design (schools randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions). The effects sizes indicate that

after being exposed to the KiVa program for nine months, the odds of being a victim or being a bully were about 1.3 times higher for a control school student than for a student in an intervention school. In primary school, the effects were even larger, with the largest effects in grades 3 and 4 (1.58 and 1.83 for victimization and 2.08 and 1.30 for bullying).

During the broad dissemination of KiVa, the effects on bullying and victimization were somewhat smaller than those obtained in the randomized controlled trial, and again they varied across grade levels, being largest in grade 4 and smallest in middle school (grades 7 to 9).¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that all effects reported so far have been obtained after only one school year (nine months) of implementation. The data from the annual student surveys from schools implementing KiVa will be used to study the effects of the program when more time has been devoted to implementation.

Besides the positive effects on bullying and victimization, KiVa has been shown to increase school liking, academic motivation, and even academic performance among students in KiVa schools as compared to students from control schools.¹⁵ Furthermore, KiVa reduces internalizing problems and negative peer perceptions and increases empathy, self-efficacy to defend the victimized peers, and constructive bystander behaviors.¹⁶ We were also impressed to discover that children who were victimized by their peers played in the online KiVa game even more often both in and out of the school compared with bullies and noninvolved students.¹⁷

The outcomes of the indicated actions, that is, discussions effectuated by KiVa teams, have been evaluated in a separate study.¹⁸ From among all cases that were tackled by KiVa teams during the randomized controlled trial, as many as 98 percent led to improvement in the victim's situation, and in 86 percent of the cases, bullying stopped completely, as reported by (former) victims in the follow-up discussions. The problem seems to be that most targets of systematic bullying still do not report their harassment at school or at home, thus hindering effective intervention. To foster reporting to adults, we have added a new feature to antibullying

computer games for grades 1 and 4 and online KiVa Street for grade 7: from the next school year on, there is a mailbox that students can use to send e-mail concerning their own victimization or victimization targeted at a peer at school. The message automatically goes to members of the school's KiVa team.

The Finnish school system has a reputation of being highly effective in terms of producing good academic outcomes (<http://pisacountry.acer.edu.au>). We are, however, even prouder of the fact that the Finnish government wanted to take students' school well-being seriously and decided that preventing bullying was a priority. Overall, the KiVa initiative is an example of how commitment from politicians as well as participating schools can lead to excellent results influencing the lives of numerous children and adolescents. The strong theoretical and empirical base of KiVa leads us to believe that it will work in contexts outside Finland as well.

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