

Identifying the Behaviors that Predict Bullying and Ways to Change them for the Better



Bullying behavior is a significant social problem that can cause serious developmental and health damage for aggressors and victims. It encompasses various forms of aggression between peers (Lacey & Cornell, 2013), including verbal (e.g., name calling), physical (e.g., hitting) and relational (e.g., social exclusion) interactions. As a form of violence, bullying behavior is characterized by intent to harm, an imbalance of power, and repetitions over time (Olweus, 2013).

Assessing and Predicting Bullying Behavior

Given the importance of understanding bullying behavior at school within the context of seemingly inconsistent research results regarding bullies' social and academic skills, Elliott, Hwang, and Wang (2018) were motivated to examine teachers' ratings of students' social behaviors and demographic variables (e.g., students sex, special education status) as predictors of bullying behavior. Using a large representative U.S. sample of students that comprised the 5- to 18-year-old segment of the national standardization sample for the *Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)* (Gresham & Elliott, 2008), Elliott et al. examined the relations among a comprehensive set of social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence to determine which ones were highly related to bullying behavior. The SSIS measures seven areas of social skills (i.e., communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, engagement, empathy, and self-control) and problem behaviors (i.e., externalizing including hyperactivity/inattention, internalizing, autism spectrum disorders, and bullying). Specifically, Elliott et al. used the SSIS *Bullying Subscale* (i.e., *Bullies others; Does things to make others feel scared; Forces others to act against their*

will; Keeps others out of social circles; and Is aggressive toward people or objects) to define and measure the frequency of bullying behaviors. Using the Teacher version of the SSIS and considering previous bullying research, it was expected that both elementary and secondary students' frequency of bullying behavior would be positively related to an array of other problem behaviors, negatively related to all the social skills areas assessed by the SSIS, as well as academic competence.

Findings regarding problem behaviors relationship to bullying behaviors. Based on existing research and experiences with children who exhibit aggression and bullying behaviors toward peers, Elliott et al. expected to find that both elementary and secondary students with high scores on the SSIS Bullying Subscale also would have co-occurring high levels of externalizing behaviors (e.g., acts without thinking, is aggressive toward people, fights with others, disobeys rules or requests, talks back to adults, lies or does not tell truth). They, in fact, did



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find evidence with both developmental groups to support this expectation with Externalizing Behavior (i.e., under-controlled actions characterized by defiant, aggressive, disruptive and noncompliant responses); Subscale more highly correlated with bullying behaviors for secondary than elementary school students. Regardless of the difference in magnitude, this study and those examined by other investigators together highlight the co-occurrence of externalizing problems and bullying behaviors during both childhood and adolescent years.

Finding regarding social skills relationship to bullying behaviors. Elliott and colleagues also found evidence to support the expected relationship between the social skill subscale of Empathy and bullying behaviors. As expected, empathic behaviors (e.g., tries to comfort others, forgives others, feels bad when others are sad, shows concern for others) were negatively related to bullying behavior for both elementary and secondary students. Thus, children and adolescents who exhibit moderate to high levels of empathy would not be expected to exhibit bullying behavior.

One of the surprising findings from the analyses of the SSIS national standardization sample was that the social skill subscale of Assertion was positively related to bullying behavior of secondary students. Assertion behaviors measured by the SSIS include asks for help, questions rule that may be unfair, stands up for him/herself when treated unfairly, and expresses feelings when wronged.

Demographic variables relationship to bullying behaviors. None of the student demographic variables investigated for either the elementary or secondary student samples contributed meaningfully to predicting bullying behaviors. This finding was unexpected. Given the sample size and its representativeness, this finding is important and indicates that bullying behavior is not likely to be predicted by one's sex or special education status. Rather, it is more ubiquitous with regard to demographic evidence.

Intervening to Improve Social Skill Deficits Associated with Bullying Behaviors

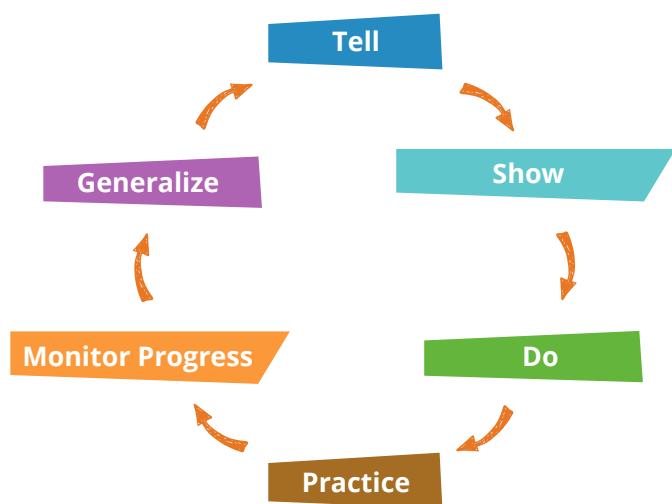
The findings that empathy skills and externalizing behaviors are predictive of bullying behaviors for both elementary and secondary students have implications for intervention efforts. Also there are intervention actions to be taken with some bullying adolescents whose assertion skills may be excessive. Specifically, the *SSIS SEL Classwide Intervention Program* (CIP; Elliott & Gresham, 2017) can be used to directly teach children and adolescents key social emotional learning skills proven to improve interactions with peers and thus reducing the need for bullying behaviors to influence others.

The SSIS SEL CIP can be used by educators and mental health professionals in schools to develop and improve social emotional learning (SEL) skills for children ages 4 to 14. Specifically, this program provides interventionists up to 23 skill units that represent core SEL competencies. These competencies, based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012) framework, are defined as **self-awareness** (recognizing one's emotions, values, and being able to assess one's strengths and weaknesses); **self-management** (being able to handle one's own emotions and behavior so that they do not interfere with accomplishment of social tasks); **social awareness** (demonstrating understanding and empathy for the feelings of others); **relationship skills** (establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships in groups and dealing effectively with conflict); and **responsible decision making** (making ethical and constructive choices about one's personal and interpersonal behaviors).

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SEL Competency Domain	SSIS SEL Classwide Intervention Program Skill Unit
Self-Management	Skill Unit #1. Listen to Others
	Skill Unit #8. Stay Calm with Others
	Skill Unit #12. Express Your Feelings
Social Awareness	Skill Unit #10. Do Nice Things for Others
	Skill Unit #20. Make Others Feel Better
Relationship Skills	Skill Unit #7. Get Along with Others
	Skill Unit #16. Ask Others to Do Things with You
Responsible Decision Making	Skill Unit #9. Do the Right Thing

The table above identifies 8 SEL skills that represent basic empathic behaviors (i.e., Skill Units 1, 7, 10, and 20) and self-control behaviors (Skill Units 8, 9, 13, and 16) that are incompatible with bullying others. Thus, if these skills can be developed and generalized by students who historically have used bullying behaviors like those measured by the SSIS, it is expected their bullying behavior will be significantly reduced or eliminated because they will have alternative ways of getting attention and interacting with peers.



The SSIS CIP uses a six-step instructional process to efficiently and effectively teach social emotional skills. These components are **Tell, Show, Do, Practice, Monitor Progress,** and **Generalize**. DiPerna and colleagues (2015, 2016, 2017) in a randomized control trial in six elementary schools funded by the U.S. Department of Education provided strong evidence to support that the SSIS CIP six-step program works with a wide range of elementary students. Specifically, they found the CIP resulted in students learning social and emotional skills (e.g., listens to others, takes turns in conversation, asks for help, stays calm when hit or pushed, does nice things for others) and performing these desired behaviors more frequently, while concurrently reducing the frequency of many common externalizing problem behaviors, and increasing academic engagement and achievement test scores. This research documenting the **triple positive impact** of the SSIS CIP resulted in CASEL designating it “a SElect program for elementary students” (<https://casel.org/guideprogramsocial-skills/>).

By following this instructional process, most teachers or mental health professionals can teach a skill lesson in 25 to 30 minutes and provide a **S.A.F.E.R. intervention** – that is, a Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit, and Responsive program that students enjoy and learn from. With the additions of CIP resource materials – PowerPoint lesson presentation, video clips, Emotions Cue cards, Student Engagement Records – all students will be engaged and the intervention is **simplified** for teaching all students, especially those who exhibit bullying behaviors, important skills for improving social relationships and academic performance.

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