

# New ways to reduce bullying and youth violence

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texting texting. Credit: juliaeatssweaters from Flickr Creative Commons

Many children and adolescents suffer physically and mentally from being bullied or physically attacked and threatened by their peers. A conference at Cambridge University will bring together researchers from across Europe to share knowledge about how bullying and youth violence can be prevented more effectively.

Lucca is a picturesque town in Tuscany, known for its intact town walls and picturesque centre. But while its ancient ramparts symbolise an ancient technique of maintaining peace and protecting citizens from violence, it is also home to a cutting-edge study on the prevention of cyber-bullying, led by psychologist Ersilia Menesini at the University of Florence. By using Facebook discussion forums and webpages, and actively involving [peers](#) as online educators, the project examines new ways of reducing bullying in [cyberspace](#). But does it work as an effective

prevention strategy? Should [adolescents](#) be actively involved in prevention strategies? And could the strategy be recommended in other European countries?

In Birmingham, children at some primary schools are given lessons designed to help them understand what it means to be sad or angry. Under the guidance of their teacher they discuss what happens if children exclude others from playing together, and what they can do about it. And while they learn about fair play and ways to solve [conflicts](#) at school, their parents can attend a course that teaches more effective ways of coping with their children's difficult behaviour at home. Such activities are part of the Brighter Futures Strategy, an ambitious project for promoting the physical, emotional, academic and behavioural well-being of children. But are they the best way of doing things? Would they still work if rolled out across the whole of Birmingham? And what other new approaches to preventing bullying and violence are currently being developed across Europe?

These are just some of the questions discussed at a conference of European prevention specialists taking place this week at the University of Cambridge. Organised by leading criminologists at the Institute of Criminology and the University of Toronto, the conference will bring together researchers from across Europe to share their knowledge.

Violence and bullying by young people causes untold damage and misery worldwide. According to the British Crime Survey, 9% those aged 16-24 were victims of a violent crime in 2009/10. Large numbers of school children are affected by bullying. Surveys suggest that some 50% of primary school children are at least occasionally teased, rejected or physically aggressed, while 5-15 % of children experience bullying at least once a week, with a peak towards the end of primary school.

In the UK, physical [youth violence](#) has gradually declined over the past

decade, but new forms of coercive and threatening behaviour have emerged. Cyber-bullying – threatening or hurtful behaviour via electronic media such as mobile phones and the internet – has become a serious problem. Sexual violence among adolescents is also emerging as a pressing issue.

Violence and bullying have serious and long-term negative effects on well-being. For example, recent research by Professor David Farrington and Dr Maria Ttofi from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge has shown that victims of bullying are at significantly increased risk of suffering from depressive symptoms in the future. Also, children who bully others at an early age are at a significantly increased risk of later offending. Such findings suggest that effective prevention should be high on the agenda for public health policy-makers.

But what is needed to make the prevention of bullying and youth violence prevention more effective? This topic will be discussed at next week's conference which will bring together 70 young and established researchers working in 12 European countries. "Until recently there has been very little knowledge exchange between researchers and policy-makers working on innovative prevention approaches across Europe," said Professor Manuel Eisner, Deputy Director of the Cambridge University Institute of Criminology, and one of the conference organisers.

"For decades, prevention research was dominated by scholarship in the US, which led the way in terms of rigorous evaluation. Next week's conference, which is supported by the European Science Foundation and the Jacobs Foundation, aims to boost knowledge exchange across Europe and open up positive avenues for the next generation of prevention policies." As Professor Eisner, explained: "Our goal is to promote the search for the best prevention strategies across Europe and to encourage co-operation between researchers and policy-makers. We believe that a

substantial reduction in bullying and youth violence is possible over the next decade, if policy-makers and researchers work together.”

The UK is well placed to play a key role in European efforts to step up high-quality evaluation of ‘what works’ in helping children and adolescents with behavioural problems. As shown by the recent Allen Report on Early Intervention, there is now cross-party support for research-based strategies to promote children’s development. Also, centres such as the Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention (Oxford), the Centre for Evidence Based Early Intervention (Bangor), the National Evaluation of Sure Start (Birkbeck College) or the Centre of Experimental Criminology (Cambridge) are home to some of the internationally excellent prevention research conducted in the UK.

The conference will demonstrate the benefits of learning from innovative research across national boundaries. For example, an innovative anti-bullying programme developed by Professor Salmivalli at the University of Turku in Finland focuses on influencing the bystanders and empowering young people to support the victim rather than encouraging the bullies. The KiVa programme which won the European Crime Prevention Award in 2009 – uses new technologies such as computer games and virtual learning environments to provide students with information (“I know”), skills (“I can”) and motivation (“I do”) that will enable them to behave constructively when witnessing bullying. A carefully conducted large-scale evaluation showed that the programme resulted in a reduction of victimisation by about 30% and of 17% for bullying perpetration. First introduced into Finnish schools in 2009, KiVa is now being implemented by more than 80% of the country’s schools.

In Italy, Professor Menesini has recently developed new approaches to prevent cyberbullying using both online and offline interventions. The programme called “Noncadiamointrappola” (“Mind the trap”) includes

the training of adolescents as peer-educators who engage other students in discussions on a web-based forum. Results showed benefits with a reduction of both cybervictimisation and cyberbullying and an increase of coping strategies and self-efficacy in emotion regulation.

The conference will look at ways in which effective approaches can be disseminated on a larger scale and, in parallel, ways in which violence prevention can be built into a broader public health approach. A case in point is the Incredible Years programme, an approach developed by psychologist Carolyn Webster-Stratton in the United States and now delivered across Wales as an integral part of public health policies. At the conference, Professor Judy Hutchings of the University of Bangor will talk about how she introduced and evaluated the programme which provides integrated support to parents, teachers and children, with participating children being identified at a young age.

Another ambitious initiative that will be discussed in depth is the Brighter Futures strategy. In partnership with the Dartington Social Research Unit, Birmingham City Council is investing in a city-wide evidence-based prevention and intervention programme to reach 260,000 children. Its dissemination is preceded by a carefully designed large-scale trial that examines the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions under real-life conditions. Dr Michael Little, co-director of the Dartington Social Research Unit, will talk about the challenges of embedding evidence-based prevention into mainstream services.

In Sweden, the government has identified the dissemination of evidence-based research knowledge into mainstream services as a major challenge. As Professor Knut Sundell will explain, the Swedish government now considers evidence-based practice as an essential vehicle of improving the quality of care and services. Hence, an agreement has been signed between the government and Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions to develop evidence-based

practice within the social services system. The National Board of Health and Welfare has been reorganised to further enhance systematic reviews, evidence and transparency for guidance and guidelines development.

Increasingly, prevention researchers also start asking what the active ingredients of successful interventions are. For example, new research by Dr Maria Ttofi and Professor David Farrington, from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, examines what is needed to make anti-bullying interventions effective: Their findings show that success is more likely if programmes are intensive in focus, if they actively involve the parents as partners, if they comprise firm disciplinary methods, and if they include improved playground supervision as core components.

Similarly, Professor Tina Malti (University of Toronto) and Professor Manuel Eisner will present findings from a study on the effects of the social skills programme Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) in Zurich, Switzerland. They examined whether particular components of the programme were associated with better results. Their findings suggest that teachers who used more lessons on relationships (e.g. how to interact with others or how to maintain friendships) achieved better results that also resulted by improvements in behavior at home.

The findings presented at the conference suggest that effective prevention can have long-term benefits. The study by Professor Friedrich Loesel conducted in Germany shows that high quality prevention during kindergarten still has some positive effects on problem behaviour after eight years. However, several obstacles currently impede faster progress in bullying and youth violence prevention across Europe. These include: a still very thin base of established knowledge on effective programmes, especially in relation to whether they make a difference over several years in the development of

children and adolescents; a lack of good knowledge on how evidence-based programmes can be embedded into mainstream services, and hurdles to the dissemination of synthesised knowledge to practitioners and decision makers. More research cooperation across Europe, possibly supported by a European clearinghouse for evidence-based prevention, could help to overcome these obstacles.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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