

# Anti-bullying program reduces malicious gossip on school playgrounds

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Elementary school students who participated in a three-month anti-bullying program in Seattle schools showed a 72 percent decrease in malicious gossip.

The study, led by the University of Washington, is the first to show that the widely-used Steps to Respect bullying prevention program can curb children's gossip, an element of playground culture often seen as harmless but capable of causing real harm.

"Gossip is an element of bullying, and it can lead to physical bullying," said Karin Frey, a UW research associate professor of [educational psychology](#). "Kids will tell you that gossip is just as painful as physical bullying."

But teachers tend to not view gossip as a significant form of bullying, Frey said. Since gossip can lead to physical bullying, she and her collaborators investigated whether the program would help suppress teasing, name-calling, rumor-spreading and other ostracizing chitchat.

The study, published in the winter issue of *School Psychology Review*, showed that having supportive friends and not choosing retaliation when victimized by malicious gossip helped participants in the program avoid further victimization.

Researchers used Palm Pilots to electronically record second-by-second observations of 610 students in grades 3-6 at six [elementary schools](#) in

the Seattle area. Researchers recorded each child's behavior on the playground for five minutes once a week for 10 weeks in the fall and 10 weeks in the spring.

"Gossip is surprisingly visible, because you have to have more than one person, and it can last awhile," said Frey, who led development of the Steps to Respect program in 2000. "Is the cootie girl in your class?" and "Did you hear Dan cheated?" are two examples of children's gossip Frey and her co-authors mention in their paper.

Not all gossip is strictly behind the back, though. The researchers also found that sometimes gossips will huddle together and clearly talk about a victim. "Without speaking loudly enough that others will know what they are saying, they'll point and look at the person they're gossiping about," Frey said.

After observers heard gossip on the playground in the fall, the anti-bullying program began in half of the 36 classrooms. During three months, teachers taught Steps to Respect lesson plans that encouraged empathy, taught assertiveness and emphasized that bullying is not a social norm.

In a questionnaire for students, the researchers measured two factors that influence bullying: beliefs about fighting back against bullies and having supportive friends.

When students' [playground](#) gossip was observed in the spring, children in the Steps to Respect classrooms had 234 fewer instances of gossip per class of 25, or a 72 percent decrease in gossip among students who had gossiped before participating in the anti-bullying program.

"Gossip is still there, but it's better," Frey said. "That's going to make a difference in the life of a child."

Kids may mistakenly subscribe to the "don't get mad, get even," philosophy. But since victims who retaliate often end up bullied even more, Steps to Respect teaches kids to not fight back. Frey and her co-authors found that gossip victims in the fall who went through Steps to Respect in the winter were less likely to believe in [retaliation](#) as a response to bullying, and more likely to avoid being a victim of gossip in the spring.

Having supportive friends also helped gossip victims. "Maybe friends use their assertiveness skills and say, 'Come on, let's go,'" Frey said.

Frey said that bystanders are really important in decreasing gossip and bullying, but many times bystanders feel uncomfortable and don't know what to do. Bystanders' silence can give a lot of power to bullies, but if bystanders speak up, the bullying stops.

"Stand up straight, look the bully in the eye, and say 'knock it off,'" Frey said. Friends who encourage victims to retaliate, on the other hand, may inadvertently set victims up for continued bullying, she said.

**More information:** Information on the Steps to Respect anti-bullying program: [www.cfchildren.org/programs/str/overview/](http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/str/overview/)

Provided by University of Washington

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