

Researchers push to import top anti-bullying program to US schools

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An interdisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Kansas plan to bring a highly successful anti-bullying effort, the KiVa program, to American schools. Starting as early as the 2012-13 school year, a pilot program could kick off in selected classrooms in Lawrence, Kan. If shown to be successful there, soon afterward the model could expand nationally.

KiVa, implemented in Finland in 2007, has impressed researchers with its proven reduction in bullying incidents. According to one recent study, KiVa "halved the risk of bullying others and of being victimized in one [school year](#)."

"Any time you see an intervention reported in the literature, if they work, they barely work," said Todd Little, KU professor of psychology and director of the Center for Research Methods and Data Analysis.

"This is one of the first interventions we're seeing with effects that are impressive and pervasive. We here at KU are going to be the sole source for testing KiVa in the U.S."

The program takes a holistic approach to the bullying problem, including a rigorous classroom curriculum, videos, posters, a [computer game](#) and role-play exercises that are designed to make schools inhospitable to bullying. When bullying episodes do occur within the school, a small team of trained employees addresses the incident individually with the victim and bully or bullies to ensure bullying is ultimately stopped.

"The KiVa program targets the peer environment, trying to create an ecology where bullying is no longer tolerated," said Anne Williford, assistant professor of [social welfare](#) at KU. "Instead of targeting only a bully and victim for intervention, it targets the whole class, including kids who are uninvolved in bullying behavior. KiVa fosters skills to help students take actions, either large or small, to shift the peer ecology toward one that does not support bullying."

The researchers said the program works because it recognizes that bullies sometimes may earn higher social status from their behavior.

"People have traditionally framed bullying as social incompetence, thinking that bullies have low self-esteem or impulse problems," said Patricia Hawley, KU associate professor of developmental psychology. "But recent research shows that bullying perpetrators can be socially competent and can win esteem from their peers."

By changing perceptions of peers who are neither bullies nor victims, the program undercuts a social environment that supports bullying.

"It changes the rewards structure," Hawley said. "At the end of the day, the goals of the bully are like yours and mine — they want friendship and status. They have human goals, not pathological ones. With KiVa, bystanders are set up to win by intervening, and their status can go up. As a bystander, I can achieve goals of friendship and status by standing up to a bully."

In Lawrence schools, the KU researchers hope to compare instances of bullying and victimization in both intervention and control groups to establish the strength of the KiVa program in a U.S. setting.

School district officials welcomed the opportunity.

"We're pleased to have the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Williford and KU's School of Social Welfare on the KiVa anti-bullying project," said Kim Bodensteiner, Lawrence USD 497's chief academic officer.

"Given our experiences using other [bullying](#) prevention programs, Lawrence Public Schools' teachers and staff can provide valuable feedback to researchers during the development of KiVa program materials. We look forward to the possibility of participating in a future pilot study."

Results from the [pilot program](#) are to be measured by KU's Center for Research Methods and Data Analysis.

Provided by University of Kansas

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