

# Popular anti-bullying program may have mixed results, study finds

January 19 2015, by Sharita Forrest

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A curriculum that is widely used by U.S. schools to diminish bullying and other forms of aggression shows promise at reducing gender- and sexual-based violence. However, the program's efficacy may vary between geographic regions, and it may not directly reduce bullying, physical aggression and victimization, a new study found.

More than 3,600 [students](#) at 36 [middle schools](#) across Illinois and Kansas participated in a two-year clinical trial of the social-emotional learning curriculum Second Step. The program has been used with more than 8 million students in more than 32,000 U.S. schools.

Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the current study – the largest examination of Second Step to date – was led by bullying and youth violence expert Dorothy L. Espelage, a professor at the University of Illinois.

During the sixth and seventh grades, students in the intervention schools received a total of 28 Second Step lessons, which covered topics such as communication, empathy, emotion regulation and bullying. As seventh-graders, they were introduced to information on [sexual harassment](#) and intervention techniques for bystanders of bullying.

Student surveys completed at multiple points indicated that homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment/sexual violence decreased by 56 percent and 39 percent, respectively, among the Illinois students – but not among their peers in the Kansas schools.

However, bullying, [physical aggression](#) and victimization did not decline at any of the intervention schools in either state, the researchers found.

"Behaviors such as bullying and aggression are likely established and elaborated upon prior to middle school, and thus were not sensitive to the Second Step intervention," said Espelage, the Gutgsell Endowed Professor of child development in the department of educational psychology. "However, homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment are far less prevalent in elementary school than in middle school, so the intervention seems to impact those behaviors that are emerging in middle school."

Second Step's lack of impact on bully perpetration and peer victimization was not surprising, according to the researchers. Recent studies have shown that bully prevention programs appear to be most effective with children in grades one through six, but their efficacy drops sharply with seventh-graders – and plummets to zero with eighth-graders.

Bullying, physical aggression and victimization were at high levels at all of the schools and significantly increased when the students transitioned from sixth to seventh grade – but did not escalate as dramatically as gender- and sexual-based violence during that time, the researchers found.

Second Step's potential for preventing gender- and sexual-based violence is encouraging because these behaviors are emerging as significant public health concerns and have been found to be precursors to dating violence, Espelage said.

Although the researchers aren't sure why the results in Kansas differed from those in Illinois, they hypothesized that the variance might be related in part to changes in administrative staff and school climate at

several Kansas school districts during the study's second year.

Additionally, three of the Kansas schools – two of the intervention schools and one of the controls – implemented another prevention program during the second year of the study. Repeated exposure to content delivered in similar formats may have caused students to become bored or disengaged, compromising Second Step's effectiveness, the researchers hypothesized.

Schoolchildren in the U.S. may be exposed to at least three or four prevention programs, a recent survey suggested, which also complicates investigative efforts by making it difficult to detect changes in students' behavior, the researchers wrote.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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