

# Program reduces bullying by students with disabilities, study finds

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A study led by Dorothy L. Espelage, the Gutsell Endowed Professor of child development and Hardie Scholar, found that the popular social-emotional learning program Second Step effectively reduced peer aggression among youths with disabilities. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Bullying perpetration decreased by 20 percent over a three-year period among youths with disabilities who participated in a social and emotional learning program, a new study found.

More than 120 students with disabilities at two school districts in the Midwest participated in the research, which was part of a larger three-year clinical trial of the widely used social-emotional learning curricula Second Step.

Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the study was led by bullying and youth violence expert Dorothy L. Espelage of the University of Illinois. Co-authors of the study were: Joshua R. Polanin, of Vanderbilt University's Peabody Research Institute, and Chad A. Rose, of the University of Missouri at Columbia.

During the sixth through eighth grades, students in the intervention schools received a total of 41 Second Step lessons, which addressed bullying, emotional regulation, empathy and [communication skills](#).

Forty-seven children received the curricula, and 76 peers were in the control group.

At the beginning of the study, students were surveyed on their involvement in verbal and relational bullying, victimization by peers and fighting. Students were re-assessed during each of the three subsequent spring terms.

Self-reported bullying perpetration significantly decreased over the course of the study among students with disabilities who received the Second Step lessons.

"The significant reduction in bullying perpetration over this three-year study is a notable finding, because much of the existing literature

suggests that students with disabilities are overrepresented in the bullying dynamic," said Espelage, the Gutgsell Endowed Professor of child development and Hardie Scholar of Education in the department of educational psychology. "Evidence suggests that this may be because they are more likely to have social and communication skills deficits, and these are foundational skills taught in the Second Step program."

Equal numbers - 47 percent - of youths in the intervention and the control groups had learning disabilities, while the remainder had cognitive, speech/language or emotional disabilities and/or health impairments.

According to prior research, students with behavioral disabilities are more likely to be identified as bullies by their teachers and peers than are other students.

Espelage and her co-authors hypothesize that the prevalence of peer aggression among these students may be a function or manifestation of their disabilities - perhaps an aggressive reaction to social stimuli - and whether they are placed in inclusive or restrictive classrooms.

The potential impact of educational placement is a notable issue, the researchers said, because more than 39 percent of students with behavioral disorders are educated in restrictive environments, according to data from the U.S. Dept. of Education.

In a 2009 study, Rose and his colleagues found that students with disabilities who received their educational services in restrictive environments were twice as likely to be bullies compared with peers without disabilities.

They also were 1.3 times as likely to bully peers compared with students who had similar disabilities but were educated in more inclusive

environments.

Reductions in fighting were not significant among children who received the Second Step intervention or their peers in the [control group](#), a finding that was unexpected, given that significant reductions in fighting were found in the larger clinical trial from which the sample was drawn, the researchers said.

The researchers hypothesized that the SEL programming may have been more successful at teaching students with disabilities to reflect on and actively manage their impulses toward proactive aggression, but not reactive aggression.

These [students'](#) reactive aggression could be a manifestation of the social information processing deficits associated with their behavioral [disabilities](#), prompting them to respond aggressively in nonthreatening social situations, the researchers suggest.

If these behaviors are disability-related, specific interventions need to be developed - above and beyond universal SEL programming - to identify and address possible triggers and social reinforcers for each child and incorporate them into each child's Individualized Education Program, the researchers recommended.

Under federal law, each child eligible for special education services must have an Individualized Education Program, a document that specifies how their disability affects their learning process and provides goals and objectives to help them learn more effectively.

The paper is available online ahead of publication in the journal *Remedial and Special Education*.

**More information:** The paper, "Social-Emotional Learning Program

to Reduce Bullying, Fighting, and Victimization Among Middle School Students with Disabilities," is available online from Sage Publications: [rse.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 564564.full.pdf+html](https://rse.sagepub.com/content/early/.../564564.full.pdf+html)

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