Adapting the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

by Belinda Basca and Amy Brinkman

CASE STUDY

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) has been found to reduce bullying among children, improve the social climate of classrooms, and reduce related antisocial behaviors, such as vandalism and truancy.

The *SDFSC Case Study Series* is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

The *SDFSC Case Study Series* is a publication of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Technical Assistance Project (SDFSC TA Project), funded and directed by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP) and managed by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS). The Case Study series is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

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Adapting the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

by
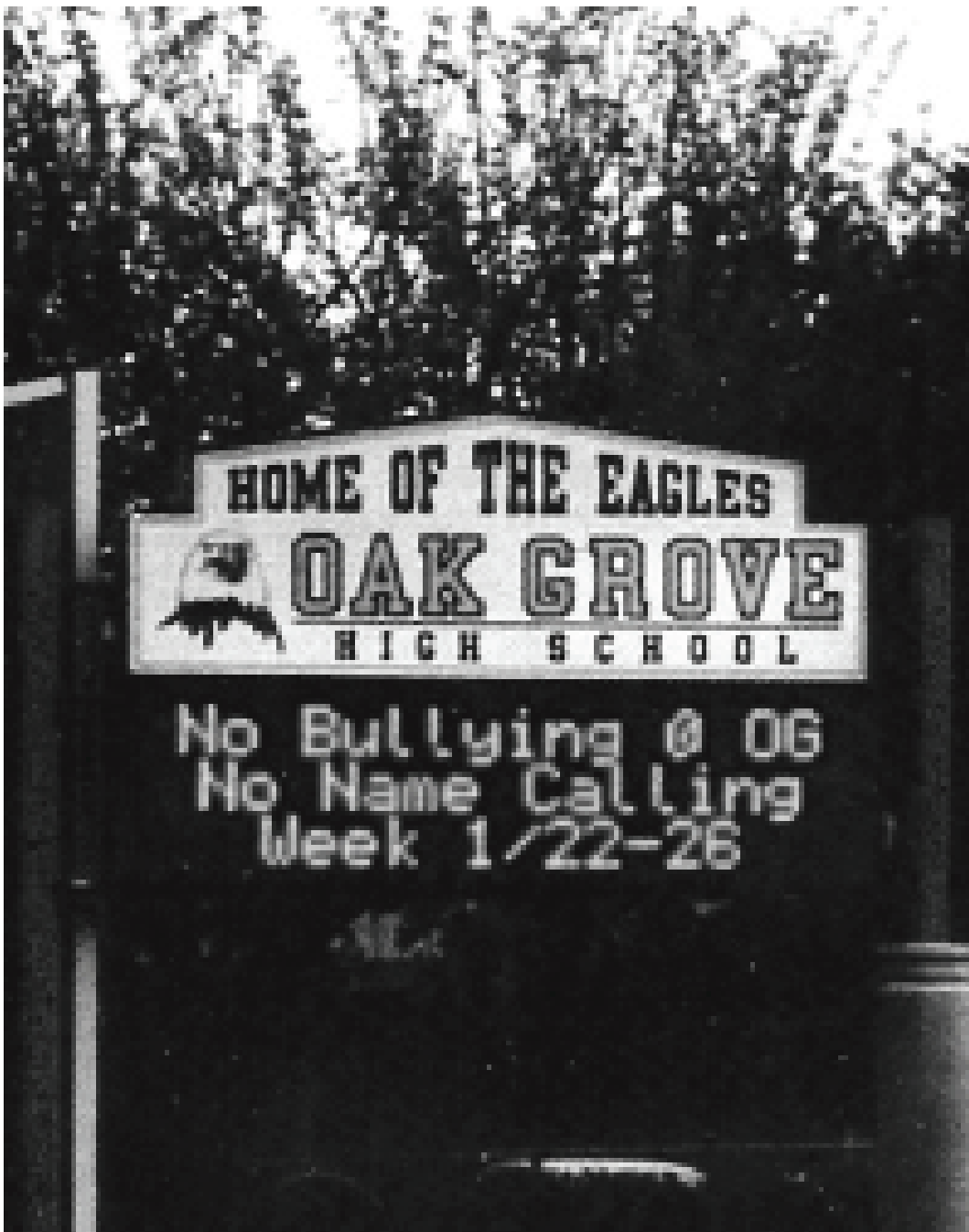
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INTRODUCTION

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is a comprehensive, school-wide program designed for use in Grades 3 through 8. Its goals are to reduce and prevent bullying problems among school children and to improve peer relations at school. The program has been found to reduce bullying among children, improve the social climate of classrooms, and reduce related antisocial behaviors, such as vandalism and truancy. The Olweus Program has been implemented in more than one dozen countries around the world.

The core components of the program are implemented at the school, classroom, individual, and community level.

SCHOOL LEVEL

Formation of a Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee

Distribution of an anonymous student questionnaire assessing the nature and prevalence of bullying

Training for committee members and staff

Development of a coordinated system of supervision

Adoption of school-wide rules against bullying

Development of appropriate positive and negative consequences for students' behavior

Holding staff discussion groups related to the program

Involvement of parents

CLASSROOM LEVEL

Reinforcement of school-wide rules against bullying

Holding regular classroom meetings with students to increase knowledge and empathy

Informational meetings with parents

COMMUNITY LEVEL

Partnerships with community organizations, businesses, houses of faith, etc.

Violence prevention coalitions

Formal and informal linkages to families, neighborhood associations, etc.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Interventions with children who bully

Interventions with children who are bullied

Discussions with parents of involved students

As many as 35% of high school students will admit to being involved in bullying/peer abuse either as an instigator or a victim.

An evaluation[1] of the Olweus program in 12 elementary schools in the Philadelphia area (Black, 2003) revealed that among those schools that had implemented the program with at least moderate fidelity:

- There were significant reductions in self-reported bullying and victimization

- There were significant decreases in adults' observations of bullying (in the cafeteria and on the playground).

[1]Black, S. (2003). An ongoing evaluation of the bullying prevention program in Philadelphia schools: Student survey and student observation data. Paper presented at Centers for Disease Control's Safety in Numbers Conference, Atlanta, GA.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has recognized OBPP as an Exemplary Program.

Although typically used with youth in Grades 3 through 8, Santa Clara County's project adapted the OBPP to a different age group. The Eastside Union High School District Bullying Prevention Program targeted 9th graders at two urban San Jose High Schools to receive the OBPP. During the adaptation and implementation of the program, OBPP developers and outside consultants were utilized.

Research[2] shows that there are four primary components to adapting a program. Santa Clara County worked with each of these components to some extent during the adaptation of OBPP. These include the following:

Adapting instructional strategies

This refers to changing the way a teacher teaches—this is, in the methodologies s/he uses to provide information to the students in his/her class. For example, instead of providing content through traditional written text, a teacher may use demonstrations or role-plays to provide students with program content.

Adapting instructional materials

This refers to changing the format through which information is represented to the student or the student's engagement with the program during the course of instruction. Most materials adaptations fall into one of four groups:

- Adjusting the readability level of written materials

- Enhancing critical features of the content within the materials themselves to identify for the student content that is most essential

- Designing materials with features that appeal to sensory modalities other than visual/auditory

- Selecting alternate instructional materials for their durability or safety features

Adapting program content

This involves adapting what is taught—that is, the complexity and nature of the content presented during the course of study. For example, a program initially developed for elementary school students would require an adjustment in the complexity of program content if used with middle school or high school youth.

Adapting assessment practices

This refers to alterations in the way a teacher gets information from the students in her class. This is not limited to the expansion of test-taking parameters, but may also encompass using multiple criteria to assess student understanding and change over time.

This case study highlights the successes and challenges that Santa Clara County faced during the adaptation of OBPP for a high school population of youth. It also offers important tips for other counties to consider when adapting an evidence-based practice to a different age group.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Eastside Union High School District Bullying Prevention Program provides services to ninth grade students and their families in two East San Jose high schools that have high rates of ATOD use, gangs, truancy and violence.

The goals of the project are (1) to adapt the Olweus program to a high school population; (2) to increase students,' parents' and teachers' awareness of bullying and its related problems; (3) to decrease incidents of bullying and bullying-related problems.

Andrew Hill and Oak Grove High Schools are in year 5, the last year of the grant to implement the OBPP. Students at these high schools participate in an anonymous Student Survey have weekly classroom discussion groups about bullying/peer abuse problems, and follow school-wide rules against bullying.

School staff receive training about bullying and the ESUHSD is in the process of adopting a new, district-wide anti-bullying policy.

The OBPP has a parent component for use with students in Grades 3-8 and their parents, which focuses on the use of parent/teacher meetings in the classroom. The ESUHSD's OBPP for its high school students also includes a parent education component about bullying/peer abuse prevention. Parents are provided with comprehensive education sessions to help them learn about bullying and how the school, parent, and child can address the issues together.

This program includes the translation of the parent education materials into Spanish and Vietnamese. While translating the OBPP into Spanish and Vietnamese, it was observed that there is no specific word for "bullying" in either language, and that bullying is an "American" concept. As a result, bilingual educators were hired and trained on the OBPP and then led focus groups with parents of students from all three language groups. Based on feedback from the focus groups, common vocabulary and terminology were adapted and used to educate parents on the concept of bullying as well as its definition.

Participation of 1278 youth during 2006 in the Eastside Union High School District Bullying Prevention Program was associated with a variety of positive activities:

At Andrew Hill High School, 60 students created a "No Bully Show" which was presented at two

Bullying

A student is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students.

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local elementary schools (about 420 4-6th graders), and for 1200 Andrew Hill students, for over 150 parents/community members.

At Andrew Hill and Oak Grove High Schools, Friday Night Live groups were established and became integral to engaging students in the OBPP.

As a result of Service Learning Projects with the elementary schools, new community relationships were forged and plans were made for additional projects in the future.

At Oak Grove, the youth formed a "No Bully" club to help with the implementation of the OBPP at their school. Club members recruit other students to participate in anti-bullying events like talent shows, skits, and educational activities for both Oak Grove and nearby elementary school students.

Oak Grove High School implemented a NO BULLY hotline (408-347-6558), for students to call if they are experiencing, witnessing, or participating in bullying and need help or support. To date, the hotline has received numerous calls and staff has been able to intervene to address the bullying.

BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

The SDFSC Working Group has been utilizing several key strategies in adapting OBPP to a different target group.

1. Contact the Program Developer

Program developers can tell you whether they or others have already adapted the program for specific audiences or circumstances. Program developers can also provide you with key information about the theory and assumptions that influenced the program's development. You can typically find contact information for program developers on registries of evidence-based programs. Getting input from the program designer is one of the best ways to ensure that any adaptations made to the program are appropriate. Many program developers will be happy to discuss your plans for implementing or adapting the program.

The ESUHSD OBPP Project Director attempted to contact the developer of OBPP, Dr. Dan Olweus, research professor of psychology, affiliated with the Research Center for Health promotion (HEMIL) at the University of Bergen in Norway. Although they were unable to contact him directly, they were put into contact with Marlene Snyder, a consultant from Whitefish Consultants who works with the program developer, Dan Olweus. Initially Dr. Snyder worked with program staff and was instrumental in conducting trainings for the ESUHSD program. However, although the County anticipated that Dr. Snyder would play a key role in the adaptation process, the SDFSC Working Group members, primarily the OBPP Project Director, had to lead the adaptation process themselves.

2. Time for Program and Materials Adaptation

The SDFSC Working Group found that they initially underestimated the amount of time it took to adapt the program to older students. The program materials from OBPP that were packaged and ready to use with Grades 3 through 8 were not ready for use with high school students.

Adaptation to the high school population was done with the assistance of Dr. Snyder, who trained Coordinating Committees on OPBB. The committees consisted of a group of adults at each school site (including an administrator, disciplinarian, teachers, parents, and non-teaching staff [custodians, bus drivers, etc.]). These adults then trained the remaining school staff so that a comprehensive approach to implementation was begun.

It was during the implementation process that further ideas for program adaptation were instituted. For example, participants noted that the term "bullying" might seem childish to high school students; therefore, the term "peer abuse" was used as a synonym for "bullying". Because of this adaptation, other topics associated with bullying/peer abuse were discussed such as sexual harassment, date rape, hazing, relationship violence, gangs, and assault. The OBPP components aided school staff in addressing these other issues. This expanded view of bullying/peer abuse increased the amount of time needed for program implementation.

Staff turnover in the ESUHSD administration, the high schools, and the SDFSC Working Group also delayed the OBPP implementation significantly. For example, over a three-year time period, there were 13 different people in three administrative positions at Andrew Hill High School. This administrative chaos resulted in the OBPP Project Director working much more closely with the schools themselves to ensure appropriate and consistent program implementation.

During the initial development of the SDFSC OBPP grant, the authors failed to complete a thorough

Readiness/Needs Assessment to determine the appropriate timing and methods for program implementation in the ESUHSD. As a result, implementation at two schools in the ESUHSD was attempted and failed before Oak Grove High School was selected. Changing schools twice resulted in logistical chaos, increased and unexpected expenditures (due to replacing OBPP materials for two schools), and interpersonal tensions between some District and Working Group members, and among Working Group members themselves. It also led to further reshaping of the OBPP program and its materials due to Oak Grove and Andrew Hill varying in size, demographics, and cultural composition.

One very common reason for adapting a program is perceived cultural mismatch between a program and its targeted audience (O'Connor et al., 2007). A large study of the effectiveness of SAMHSA Model Programs in various settings found that in situations where the "culture" of the program was different from the culture of the target audience, adaptations were less damaging to the program's effectiveness (Emshoff et. al., 2003).

However, developing cultural competency in the OBPP at Oak Grove and Andrew Hill proved to be time consuming, expensive, and challenging. For example, the SDFSC grant funded a contract agency to create and implement a parent education component. The contract agency did not create a culturally appropriate parent education curriculum. As a result, members of the SDFSC Working Group developed a subcommittee to take on the task. The end product was the development of a multicultural parent education component. All materials were translated into Spanish and Vietnamese. In addition, bilingual parent educators were hired, trained on the OBPP, and facilitated parenting groups.

Program staff learned that in the Vietnamese and Spanish languages, there is no easy translation for the word "bullying." This made the concept difficult to grasp for some parents.

In addition, staff found that acceptable behaviors in other cultures are less acceptable in the United States. Even household practices in other cultures may be considered "bullying" by Americans. One Latino parent in particular acknowledged afterwards that he bullied his family at home (according to the definition given to him by program staff).

4. Appropriateness of Survey Instruments

The OBPP requires an anonymous Student Survey to be administered annually. This survey provides data about the frequency of bullying, types of bullying behavior, school staff's responsiveness to bullying problems and where bullying occurs. The OBPP developer would not allow any changes to the content of the Student Survey, even for use with high school students. Efforts were made, however, to administer the Survey in a manner geared for ESUHSD students. For example, a Spanish translation of the Survey was utilized (though at the time, the OBPP developers did not have this available), and teachers did not read aloud each question of the survey to the students (as is done with younger children). Also, the margins and spacing of the Surveys were reformatted to decrease the number of pages of the survey from 32 to approximately 10 pages. These extra efforts to accommodate the high school students did not change the content of the Survey, but made the testing event more user-friendly and age-appropriate.

Besides collecting data from the two experimental schools, the project also established a comparison school, in which youth were surveyed who had not had the OBPP intervention. In this way, a true comparison could be made between the experimental and comparison groups to show the impact of the program on high school youth.

Preliminary statistics from the pre/post test survey for school year 2005-2006 indicated that at Oak Grove and Andrew Hill High Schools and the comparison school, the primary place that bullying occurred was "in the classroom with the teacher present." The Olweus consultant for the program, Marlene Snyder, was concerned about these results, as "this is the first time that in the classroom with the teacher present" was the primary "hot spot" in any of the schools with which she has worked. A second finding regarding sexual harassment found that girls at Oak Grove had a higher rate of being bullied in this way than female students at Andrew Hill. These results shed important light on the need for anti-bullying programs at the high school level, and have highlighted for the ESUHSD administration that they are benefiting from the OBPP and its anti-bullying strategies, and can begin to improve learning environments for their students.

TIPS FOR REPLICATING SUCCESS

Santa Clara County Prevention staff shared with us some tips on replicating success for other SDFSC programs who are trying to adapt a program of a different age group.

1. Contact the Program Developer

- Ensure that you have support from the developer to consult and guide during the adaptation process and in developing, implementing, and applying the program in the schools. This will help to maintain the fidelity and integrity of the program in the new setting.

- Encourage the program developer to put you into contact with other programs that may be doing similar program adaptations. Establishing a support system such as this can be important as you encounter obstacles in your adaptation, especially if other programs have already found ways to overcome them.

2. Allocate time for materials and program adaptation

- Have realistic expectations for the amount of time the program developer can devote to your program. Even if they commit to assisting in your adaptation, expect that you will have to spearhead most of the adaptation yourselves (and this can take a lot of time).

- Anticipate staff turnover at all levels of program adaptation and implementation that may result in overall time delays for the program.

- Maintain close contact with the state monitor, the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP). Keep them abreast of obstacles encountered and possible time delays in program implementation. Taking a proactive approach created less tension when program changes had to be made.

3. Develop culturally competent materials

- Before you begin, understand and be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of your program participants. What may be acceptable in one culture is not acceptable in another.

- Understand the nuances of the culture to help steer conversations and provide participants with the best interpretation of the concept at hand.

4. Ensure apropriateness of survey instruments

- Check with the program developer to ensure that adaptations can be made to evaluation materials. Oftentimes program developers will not let you adapt evaluation materials for your use.

- Make sure evaluation materials are appropriate for the target population.

- If you are developing new evaluation instruments, make sure they are piloted with a sample population to ensure their validity.

5. Look for small successes

- Realize that completing adaptation of a proven program can take years.

- Honor the efforts of your team and acknowledge progress along the way.

- Strengthen and enjoy working relationships with those involved in your collaboration.

- Remember the client/community you are serving. They will benefit from many of your efforts during implementation, even though the implementation process happens over time.

- Celebrate the fact that you have taken on the challenge of adapting a program to benefit another target population. This effort is admirable, bold and can offer new benefits to your schools and community.

Additional Resources

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