

Tackling Acute Cases of School Bullying in the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program: A Comparison of  
Two Approaches

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## Abstract

Whether cases of bullying should be handled in a direct, condemning mode or in a manner that does not involve blaming the perpetrator is a controversial issue among school professionals. This study compares the effectiveness of a Confronting Approach where the bully is openly told that his behavior must cease immediately to a Non-Confronting Approach where the adult shares his concern about the victim with the bully and invites him or her to provide suggestions on what could improve the situation. We analysed 339 cases of bullying involving 314 children from grades 1 to 9 (mean age = 11.95). Cases were handled in 65 schools as part of the implementation of the KiVa anti-bullying program. In each school, a team of 3 teachers addressed cases coming to their attention by organizing discussions with the bullies using either a Confronting or a Non-Confronting Approach; schools were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Victims reported that bullying stopped in 78% of the cases. Logistic regression analyses indicated that neither approach was overall more effective than the other, controlling for grade level, duration of victimization and type of aggression. The Confronting Approach worked better than the Non-Confronting Approach in secondary school (grades 7 to 9), but not in primary school (grades 1 to 6). The Confronting Approach was more successful than the Non-Confronting Approach in cases of short-term victimization, but not in cases of long-term victimization. The type of aggression used did not moderate the effectiveness of either approach.

## Tackling Acute Cases of School Bullying in the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program: A Comparison of Two Approaches

In November 2005, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair told the House of Commons that he was shocked to hear that a No-Blame approach was one of the methods recommended by local authorities to deal with bullying, a behavior defined as systematic abuse of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994) or repeated aggression against a victim who cannot readily defend him- or herself (Olweus, 1993). He deemed the policy “dangerous and reckless” and claimed that “bullies should be punished” (Jackson, 2006). The approach was subsequently excluded from the Department of Education and Skills’ anti-bullying guidelines. The No-Blame approach, which originated with the work of Barbara Maines and George Robinson (1992) and has now been renamed the Support Group Method, is a non-punitive strategy seeking to change the behaviors of bullies by making them aware of the suffering that such behavior causes for the victim. Many schools and local authorities in England, where it was widely implemented, report being satisfied with it (Smith, Howard, & Thompson, 2007) and supporters of this approach or other non-punitive approaches claim that they are effective (Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2004).

In many countries, it is now a legal requirement for schools to adopt some form of anti-bullying policy. However, empirical evidence demonstrating the higher effectiveness of either non-punitive approaches or more authoritarian methods is still lacking; various methods of tackling cases of bullying (e.g., restorative justice) have been developed and some antibullying programs may use a combination of different strategies, further complicating the task of policy-makers. In this highly controversial debate, research assessing the relative effectiveness of different strategies across various bullying contexts is urgently needed. The potential for damaging consequences of bullying on victims’ mental and physical health is widely documented

(e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010); it is therefore essential that schools be provided with evidence-based guidelines regarding the best ways to handle bullying incidents. The present study examines the effectiveness of anti-bullying discussions conducted by teachers with students involved in cases of bullying, as part of KiVa, a nationwide anti-bullying program implemented in Finland (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Alanen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, et al., 2011). Two different strategies were tested: a Non-Confronting Approach, similar to the Support Group and Shared Concern methods (see Pikas, 2002), and a more traditional, authoritarian, Confronting Approach. First, we investigate the effects of type of approach, along with students' grade level, duration of victimization, and type of aggression, on the effectiveness of the discussions at stopping bullying. Second, we test whether the effectiveness of each approach is moderated by the effects of these other factors.

### **Teacher Interventions in Bullying Incidents**

Little research has examined how successful teacher interventions are at putting a stop to ongoing bullying, regardless of the method used. A few studies have been conducted in different countries and all lead to the same conclusion that the success rate of adult interventions in specific cases of bullying is relatively low (e.g., Smith & Shu, 2000). Teachers are often unaware that a child is being bullied (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005), as many children do not tell anyone about their situation, or would rather report it to a family member or a friend (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). When teachers know, they do not always intervene (Whitney & Smith, 1993), and when they do step in, their interventions do not consistently produce the expected outcomes. In a study of 2,308 early adolescents in England, Smith and Shu (2000) showed that, when teachers did take actions after the victim reported being bullied, the bullying stopped for only 27% of the victims and decreased for 29% of them. However, 28% of victims reported no

change in their situation while for 16% of them the bullying got worse. A survey of 2,766 Dutch children (Fekkes et al., 2005) indicated that, when teachers knew about the bullying and intervened (the strategy was not specified), bullying decreased in 49% of cases, remained the same in 34%, and got worse in 17%. Although reporting bullying to school personnel does increase the likelihood that it will stop, interventions by teachers do not ensure that the situation of the victim will improve.

Bullying researchers have suggested that the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions may depend mostly on age, but disagree on whether it is higher for younger or older children. Some suggest that children in primary school may be less vulnerable to peer pressure and more influenced by teachers, making teacher interventions more likely to work (Smith, 2010). Consistent with this view, Rigby and Barnes (2002) found that teacher interventions in bullying cases were much more successful among 8/9 year-olds than among teenagers. The Finnish KiVa program as a whole was also found to reduce bullying more in primary than in secondary school (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Alanen, et al., 2011). However, a meta-analysis of anti-bullying programs' effectiveness concluded that they yielded better results with older children (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The authors argue that older bullies should be more apt to alter their behaviors thanks to lower impulsivity and higher cognitive skills. Therefore, the extant literature makes it difficult to predict whether the effectiveness of targeted interventions in the context of a whole-school program would differ for children and adolescents and which age group may benefit more from them.

Research about teachers' effectiveness in handling bullying incidents does not always specify which strategies have been used. Bauman, Rigby and Hoppa (2008) sought to identify the various approaches that both school counselors and teachers adopt for tackling cases of

bullying and distinguished five main dimensions, including *enlisting other adults* (such as contacting the victim's and the bully's parents or discussing the issue with colleagues), *working with the victim* (such as promoting their assertiveness and their abilities for self-defense), *working with the bully* (such as helping the bully achieve higher self-esteem and sharing concern about the victimized child with the bully), *disciplining the bully* (such as telling the bully that his behavior is not tolerated) and *ignoring the incident*. Disciplining the bully was the most commonly endorsed strategy, whereas working with the victim was the least frequently reported approach, with the exception of ignoring the incident. These various approaches were not mutually exclusive; teachers typically mentioned several ways of handling bullying cases. The lack of detail in current studies regarding the type of approach that was used to deal with bullying incidents partly accounts for the absence of consensus among bullying experts and school professionals on the best anti-bullying strategies.

### **Two Approaches for Dealing With Bullies**

Traditional, disciplinary approaches are the most commonly employed by teachers faced with bullying incidents. According to a large international survey of teachers and school educators, virtually all of them reported that they believed it should be made clear to the bully that bullying behavior was not tolerated and 71% believed that it was warranted to use some form of punishment (see Rigby & Bauman, 2010). The use of direct, confronting strategies has been recommended by pioneering researcher Dan Olweus in his anti-bullying intervention program (Olweus, 1993). He believes that when school rules have been broken - as is the case when bullying has occurred - there should be a sanction of some form for the bully and it should be made clear to him or her that the sanction is a consequence of the bullying behavior. The sanction itself need not be actual punishment, but might simply consist of telling the bully's

parents about the incident or having a serious talk with the bully. In their meta-analysis, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) concluded that disciplinary strategies were an intervention component that yielded significant decreases in bullying behaviors. However, they did point out that this finding was partly accounted for by the large effects of the whole Olweus program. Findings on the effectiveness of the program as a whole do not allow us to conclude that confronting strategies are more effective than other strategies.

Indirect or non-confronting approaches include the No-Blame Approach, now renamed the Support Group Method (Robinson & Maines, 2008) and the Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 2002). These two methods are mostly similar: Both are non-punitive strategies and rely on the assumption that bullying is mainly a group phenomenon. Both consist of a series of meetings with the target and the perpetrators. The main difference between the two methods lies in the organization of those meetings. The Shared Concern Method starts with individual meetings followed by group meetings with the suspected bullies and avoids interviewing the target first. On the other hand, the first step of the Support Group Method is to talk with the victimized child, then hold a group meeting, followed by individual meetings. Both approaches aim to arouse feelings of uneasiness among the perpetrators: The goal of the discussions with them is to establish an agreement that the situation is painful for the victim and something must be done to change it. These approaches allow adults to avoid defensive and angry reactions by bullies by placing the focus on trying to solve the situation. In particular, bullies should be less tempted to deny responsibility in the incident when they are not blamed for it. Indeed, children and adolescents who bully others are less likely to admit to their behavior in a face-to-face discussion with an adult than in a questionnaire (Ahmad & Smith, 1990).

According to Pikas (1989), the method of Shared Concern should work better with pupils older than 9 years old, as younger children may lack the cognitive abilities required to take part in group discussions and produce constructive suggestions on what could improve the situation. Moreover, children and adolescents differ in how they respond to authority. Adolescents may be more likely to rebel against the use of authority that characterizes confronting approaches; for this reason, the method of Shared Concern may be more suitable to them (Rigby & Griffiths, 2010).

The Shared Concern Method has been used in a variety of countries, including Canada, Australia, England, Spain, Finland and Sweden (Rigby & Griffiths, 2010). Smith, Cowie, and Sharp (1994) analyzed case studies of 30 pupils and 6 teachers evaluating how effective the method was at reducing bullying. Although the sample size was too small to draw any conclusions regarding effectiveness, pupils reported improvements in the short term and satisfaction with being offered the opportunity to express their own feelings and opinions and making suggestions for solutions rather than being told by an adult what they should do.

Nevertheless, these indirect approaches have been met with severe criticism. According to Olweus (1988), they can be perceived as unethical as they involve manipulation: The adult does not openly hold the bully responsible for what happened, although he knows this to be the case. Another concern that Olweus has expressed regarding the use of no-blame or shared-concern strategies is their reliance on bullies' feelings of empathy. Research shows indeed a tendency for aggressive young males to have low levels of empathy (e.g., Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007), which could imply that appealing to bullies' empathetic capacity is bound to fail. Other studies have emphasized that many bullies in fact hold advanced moral competence (i.e., knowledge of what is right and wrong) and theory-of-mind skills (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006;

Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2011; Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999), suggesting that oftentimes bullies may already be highly aware of the suffering they are causing for the victim. Strategies aimed at raising concern for the victim may therefore be unproductive.

### **Distinguishing the Two KiVa Approaches From Other Anti-Bullying Practices**

One should keep in mind that some antibullying programs may use a combination of various strategies, and the Confronting and Non-Confronting approaches that were tested within the KiVa program are not the only options for dealing with school bullies. They share some similarities with but also differ from other well-known approaches. Zero-tolerance policies, which have been widely implemented in the US in the 1990s and 2000s, assign predetermined and severe punishment – typically suspension or expulsion – to any violation of school rules regardless of its context or gravity. Consistent with such a policy, adults in KiVa schools were told to launch the procedure for these targeted interventions in a systematic way when bullying came to their attention. Any case identified as “bullying” was always to be considered as a serious offense and there had to be consequences for the offenders. This applied to both approaches. Nevertheless, in order to determine whether an incident was in fact “bullying,” great attention had to be paid to the context, since bullying is defined by an imbalance of power (e.g., a peer group vs. an isolated victim). Extreme punitive measures were not recommended as part of the implementation of KiVa; evidence is now accumulating that they do little to improve children’s safety in schools (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

The growing controversy regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance approaches has led to an increased interest in non-punitive strategies of dealing with bullies, most notably

restorative justice (Braithwaite, 2004). Restorative approaches and the Confronting Approach are similar in that they hold perpetrators of bullying responsible for their actions. Consistent with the Non-Confronting Approach, restorative justice fosters understanding by the offender of the harm that has been done to the victim. At the heart of the restorative justice philosophy is also “restitution” or repair of the harm (Fields, 2003). This often involves victim-offender mediation, which are conversations designed to resolve the conflict. This type of mediation was not encouraged in the KiVa program which conceives of bullying as an abuse of power against a vulnerable target. In this perspective, putting an end to abusive behavior is the key, while sustaining interactions between perpetrator and target would be potentially harmful.

### **The Present Study**

The extant body of research on traditional confronting strategies and non-punitive strategies for handling individual cases of bullying does not allow us to conclude that one type of approach overall surpasses the other. There is also no clear indication that one approach might be preferable in certain cases, while the other would be more suitable to other cases. The scarcity of studies comparing these two different strategies simultaneously accounts partly for this uncertainty. The present study aims to fill this gap.

The first objective of this study was to examine predictors of the effectiveness of anti-bullying discussions conducted by teachers with the students involved in cases of bullying. These discussions were held using either a Confronting or a Non-Confronting Approach, and we were particularly interested in whether the type of approach made a difference for the effectiveness of the discussions. The lack of research directly comparing these two strategies did not allow us to make any directional hypothesis regarding the higher effectiveness of one

approach over the other. We also tested whether the effectiveness of the interventions depended on the grade level of the students (primary school or secondary school), the duration of victimization (i.e., how long the bullying had been going on for the victim), and the type of aggression that was used (hitting, name-calling, social exclusion, and telling lies). We expected interventions to be less successful for cases involving relational forms of aggression as the complexity of this behavior makes it particularly difficult to tackle (see Leff, Waasdrop, & Crick, 2010), and for cases of long-term victimization as the processes involved must be deeply ingrained and thus harder to alter. The second objective was to examine whether the effectiveness of each approach differed depending on grade level, duration of victimization and type of aggression. No hypothesis could be made regarding the significance and direction of these interactions.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

KiVa (an acronym for *Kiusaamista Vastaan* meaning “against bullying”) is an anti-bullying program that was developed in Finland in 2006 through funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. It was evaluated by a randomized controlled trial in 2007-2008 before being disseminated nationwide in 2009, following a sampling procedure described in detail elsewhere (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, et al., 2011). To recruit participants, parents or guardians of the children were sent consent forms, along with information letters about the program. The forms were returned to the homeroom teachers, who sent them to the KiVa staff. In order to increase return and consent rates, the information letter included a message by the principal of the school stating his belief in the importance of the study. In addition, the

documents were translated into 15 languages to ensure that immigrant parents would not deny consent due to lack of understanding. Only children who received active consent to participate were considered in this study. The first phase of the evaluation (2007–2008) involved Grades 4–6, with 78 participating schools that were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions (39 and 39 schools, respectively). In these grades, 91.7% of children obtained active consent from their parents. During the second phase (2008–2009), the program effects were evaluated in Grades 1–3 and 7–9, with 39/39 intervention and 40/39 control schools in the former and latter age levels, respectively. Active parental consent was received by 93.4% of 1st- to 3rd-graders and 87.4% of 7th- to 9th-graders. Among the 78 intervention schools of the second phase of evaluation, 31 had been control schools in the first phase; a total of 3 intervention schools did not provide any data and were thus dropped from the evaluation.

All intervention schools were randomly assigned to one of the two approaches, so that half of the schools used the Confronting Approach and the other half the Non-Confronting Approach. The data that we analysed came from 65 schools (55.6% of all intervention schools) who returned the forms in which the teachers from the school teams reported the actions that had been taken and the details of each discussion. There was no significant difference between these 65 schools and the other intervention schools in average rates of peer-reported bullying before program implementation ( $t = .42, p = .674$ ) or one year after ( $t = .67, p = .502$ ). The proportion of primary (vs secondary) schools also did not differ between schools who returned forms about bullying cases and those who did not,  $\chi^2(1) = .21, p = .649$ . Data were provided on a total of 609 cases over one school year. However, 62 cases involved victims who had no active parental consent to participate in the evaluation study, and 208 cases for which no information was provided regarding the outcome of the discussion (i.e., whether the bullying had stopped). Therefore, those cases were excluded from our analyses.

We investigated 339 bullying cases, which involved 314 victimized children (i.e., 289 were involved as victims in one case and 25 in two cases); this target sample of victimized children included 196 boys (62.5%), 2.7% of immigrants and 4.4% of Swedish-speaking students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 11.95$  years,  $SD = 2.33$ , age range: 6-16 years). The mean number of cases per school was 5.22 ( $SD = 5.41$ ) and ranged from 1 to 27. Among the 65 schools, 32 (49.2%) were using the Non-Confronting Approach and 33 (50.8%) the Confronting Approach. Among the 339 cases reported and treated in those schools, 160 (47.2%) were handled with the Non-Confronting Approach and 179 (52.8%) with the Confronting Approach. As shown in Figure 1, the cases involved students of all grade levels. Their number increased gradually across primary school grades (from approximately 6% in grade 1 to 10% in grade 6). There was a noticeable peak in grade 7 (about 30% of all cases), which is the first year of secondary school in Finland and possibly corresponds to a difficult phase in peer relations generating an increase in aggressive behaviors (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007).

## **Procedure**

**General description of KiVa.** The development of KiVa was guided by research on participant roles in bullying showing that bystanders' behavior – assisting the bully or defending the victim – matters for the maintenance of bullying (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). The program aims at changing bystanders' bully-supportive behaviors into victim-supportive behaviors. To this end, KiVa includes components that target all students, called *universal actions*, which are student lessons (i.e., lectures on bullying mechanisms with learning-by-doing exercises), a computer game to improve skills and motivation to change one's behavior in bullying situations, and a parents' guide. In order to deal with cases of bullying that do occur, KiVa includes *indicated actions*, which are the focus of the present study.

**Indicated actions using two approaches.** Every time a suspected case of bullying comes to the attention of the personnel in a KiVa participating school, a screening procedure takes place to ensure that the case involves a repeated abuse of power with potentially negative effects on the victim and is not a mere conflict between pupils. The member of the school staff who is contacted about the case – either by the victim, the parents of the victim, or other students – fills out a form to document that the case does fulfill the criteria for bullying. Each KiVa school has a team of three teachers (or other school personnel) who handle any case recognized as bullying. They organize a series of discussions – first an individual meeting with the victim, then with the bully, followed by a group discussion with all bullies in cases involving more than one bully. These discussions are targeted only at the victims and perpetrators of bullying and take place as soon as possible after the case of bullying has come to the attention of the team. Furthermore, the classroom teacher discusses the issue with a few non-involved prosocial classmates to encourage them to support the victim. About two weeks after this intervention, follow-up meetings are organized with the victim and the bully (or bullies) separately. In this meeting, the victim reports to the adult if and how the situation has changed. The meeting with the bully is an opportunity for adults to give positive feedback in most cases. If no improvement has been observed, the meeting consists of a further discussion of additional steps to be taken.

When the team of teachers held the discussions with the students who had engaged in bullying, they used either a Confronting Approach or a Non-Confronting Approach, depending on the instructions that their school had received; half of the schools implementing the KiVa program had been instructed to use one approach while the other half had been instructed to use the other approach, via random assignment. The two approaches are similar in many respects. With both approaches, the adults open the discussion by presenting the issue: “That child has

been victimized and this is a problem.” Also, with both approaches, the discussion ends with a request to the bully that he commits to a behavior: “What are you going to do now?” With the Confronting Approach, the perpetrator is openly held responsible for what happened and asked to stop his behavior immediately. Teachers using the Non-Confronting Approach do not blame the bully and instead share their concern about the child being victimized, saying “I’ve heard that this kid is having a hard time. What do you think about it? What could be done to help with the situation?” The bully is invited to make suggestions on what could improve the situation for the victim.

Prior to program implementation, the school team members received two days of face-to-face training, including one day devoted to the indicated actions. Teachers were trained only in the approach that their school had been instructed to use. In addition, networks of three school teams were created and meetings of the networks’ members took place three times during the school year, under the guidance of someone from the KiVa project. Networks were created so that members of schools using the same approach would meet together. The school staff members had to report on their experience using the specific approach that had been assigned to their school, which allowed the researcher from the KiVa project to check that they were implementing the approach as it was meant to be implemented.

## **Measures**

The two approaches were used in the context of a series of meetings between children involved in bullying and the members of the school teams. The school team members were asked to fill in a report based on each meeting during the process. In the forms, the school teams reported the following:

**Forms of victimization.** On the basis of the victim's answer to the question of how he/she had been bullied, the team members marked on the report each form mentioned. Several forms could be reported for each individual case. The forms listed in the team report and the proportion of cases in which they were mentioned were as follows: name-calling (78.2%), hitting (38.8%), social exclusion (17.8%), telling lies/spreading rumors (13.8%), bullying with sexual content (12%), threatening (8.3%), bullying via mobile phone (6.2%), stealing/damaging things (5.8%), racist remarks (5.5%), bullying via internet (4.3%), and other (22%). In the present analyses, we chose to examine the effects of the four forms most frequently reported (name-calling, hitting, social exclusion and telling lies/spreading rumors). Four dummy-coded variables ( $0 = \text{the form was not mentioned by the victim}$ ,  $1 = \text{the form was mentioned by the victim}$ ) were created to represent these four types of aggression.

**Duration of victimization.** The victim was asked how long the bullying had been going on. The durations listed in the team report and the proportion of cases in which they were mentioned were: 1 = a week or two (17.9%), 2 = a month (34.2%), 3 = two to six months (16.9%), 4 = six to 12 months (12.4%), 5 = more than a year (18.6%). The proportion of cases at each level of duration was not equal across the two approaches. For cases that had lasted shorter than 6 months (levels 1, 2 and 3), 57.5% of them were handled with the Confronting Approach (versus 42.5% for the Non-Confronting); for cases of long-term victimization, 42.1% were handled with the Confronting Approach (versus 57.9%). This variable ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) was used as a continuous variable and mean-centered in the regression analyses. We centered the variable only so that it would have a meaningful zero-point; mean-centering does not alter the power to detect interactive effects nor the significance of the product terms (Dalal & Zickar, 2012).

**Victim's report of the outcome.** In the follow-up discussion with the victim, the team members asked him or her whether the situation had changed, and chose the option that best

described the victim's opinion: 1 = bullying had completely stopped, 2 = it had decreased, 3 = it had remained the same, or 4 = it had gone worse. This variable was used as the measure of effectiveness of the intervention and was the dependent variable in our analyses. As responses 3 and 4 were given in only 2.4% of cases (see descriptive statistics below), we transformed it into a binary variable with the following coding: 1 for cases where bullying stopped and 0 for cases where bullying did not stop (i.e., decreased, remained the same or got worse).

In order to assess participant responsiveness to the two approaches, a survey was administered to all bullies involved in these interventions. Immediately after the first discussion with the adults, each bully anonymously filled out an 11-item questionnaire, which aimed to capture the extent to which bullies had felt blamed by the adult (e.g., "The adult blamed me for things that have happened"), the extent to which their empathy had been aroused (e.g., "The adult tried to make me understand how bad my schoolmate is feeling," "The adult did not blame me, but wanted me to help the schoolmate who is having a difficult time") as well as their intention to change their behavior. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (from *it is not true* to *it is true*). After responding, the students themselves put the questionnaire in an envelope, sealed it and gave it to the KiVa team members who sent them to the researchers. Consistent with our expectations, MANOVA results indicated that bullies exposed to the Confronting Approach gave significantly higher ratings to items assessing feelings of being blamed ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than bullies exposed to the Non-Confronting Approach ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $F = 37.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Items measuring adults' attempt to raise empathic concern for the victim received higher ratings from bullies exposed to the Non-Confronting Approach ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) than from bullies exposed to the other approach ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = .99$ ), although the difference was only marginally significant ( $F = 3.88$ ,  $p = .050$ ; Vartio, 2013). Overall, these analyses show that the

way these interventions were conducted differed and these differences were in the expected direction.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The proportion of victims who reported during the follow-up discussions that their bullying situation had improved was extremely high. In 78.2% of the 339 cases, victims reported that the bullying had stopped, in 19.5% of the cases that it had decreased and in 2.1% of the cases that the situation had not changed. In only one case did the victim state that the situation had gone worse (0.3%).

Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences in the effectiveness of the indicated actions by grade level: The proportion of successful interventions (i.e., cessation of bullying) was 78.1% in primary school and 78.2% in secondary school, suggesting that the discussions were as efficient with younger children as they were with adolescents,  $\chi^2(1) = .001, p = .977$ . However, these analyses indicated that the interventions were more likely to make the bullying stop when the Confronting Approach was used (83.2% of success) than when the Non-Confronting Approach was used (72.5% of success),  $\chi^2(1) = 5.711, p = .017$ . There was no association between use of physical aggression (i.e., “hitting”) and the success of the interventions,  $\chi^2(1) = .465, p = .495$ . The use of name-calling,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.205, p = .073$ , and telling lies,  $\chi^2(1) = .506, p = .477$ , did not make a difference either. The use of social exclusion mattered, however. The proportion of cases where the bullying stopped was 80.6% among cases that did not involve social exclusion and only 67.2% among those that did,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.992, p = .025$ .

## Regression Analyses

We used logistic regression to test the effects of seven predictors, namely type of approach (Confronting versus Non-Confronting), grade level (primary versus secondary school), duration of victimization, use of physical aggression (i.e., hitting), verbal aggression (i.e., name-calling), social exclusion, and telling lies, on the probability that the bullying had stopped (versus not stopped) at follow-up. In these analyses, the Non-Confronting Approach and primary school were the reference groups (coded as 0, while Confronting Approach and secondary school were coded as 1). With regard to the four forms of aggression, the absence of the behavior was coded as 0 and the presence of the behavior as 1. First, we examined only the main effects of the seven predictors; in a second model, we added interactions between the effects of type of approach and each of the six other predictors.

**Main effects.** In the first model testing only the main effects of the predictors (see Table 1), no significant effect was found for type of approach ( $OR = 1.67, p = .085$ ), grade level ( $OR = .86, p = .620$ ), use of hitting ( $OR = .78, p = .399$ ), name-calling ( $OR = .56, p = .134$ ), or telling lies ( $OR = 1.33, p = .515$ ). However, there was a main effect of duration of victimization on the likelihood that the bullying would stop ( $OR = .79, p = .021$ ); the longer the victimization had been going on, the smaller the chances that the intervention would have a positive outcome. The use of social exclusion also reduced the likelihood that the intervention would make the bullying cease ( $OR = .46, p = .022$ ).

**Interaction effects.** A second model was run to investigate whether the effects of each approach were moderated by grade level, duration of victimization, as well as use of each of the four types of aggression. The effects of each approach did not depend on the type of aggression that was used, as there was no significant interaction between type of approach and use of hitting

( $OR = .89, p = .845$ ), name-calling ( $OR = 2.29, p = .300$ ), social exclusion, ( $OR = 1.62, p = .497$ ) or telling lies ( $OR = .42, p = .359$ ).

There was a significant interaction between grade level and type of approach ( $OR = 4.41, p = .015$ ; see Figure 2). Post-hoc analyses revealed that in secondary school, the Confronting Approach was more effective than the other Approach ( $OR = 3.08, p = .007$ ). In primary school, there was no difference between the two approaches ( $OR = .87, p = .746$ ). Among cases handled with the Non-Confronting Approach, interventions tended to be more effective in primary school than in secondary school, although the difference was only marginally significant ( $OR = .49, p = .070$ ). However, among cases handled with the Confronting Approach, there was no significant difference in effectiveness between the two grade levels ( $OR = 1.73, p = .204$ ).

The effectiveness of each approach also depended on how long the victimization had been going on ( $OR = .63, p = .032$ ), as shown in Figure 3. Decomposition of the interaction at each of the five values of the “duration of victimization” variable revealed that the Confronting Approach was more effective than the Non-Confronting Approach when victimization had lasted 1 or 2 weeks ( $OR = 3.64, p = .014$ ), or 1 month ( $OR = 2.49, p = .014$ ). When victimization had lasted 2 to 6 months, the difference between the two approaches was only marginally significant ( $OR = 1.70, p = .074$ ). There was no difference for cases of victimization lasting 6 to 12 months ( $OR = 1.16, p = .670$ ) or more than a year ( $OR = .80, p = .648$ ). Duration of victimization mattered for the effectiveness of cases handled with the Confronting Approach ( $OR = .64, p = .004$ ). The approach was less effective with cases of long-term victimization than with cases of short-term victimization. However, for cases handled with the Non-Confronting Approach, the effectiveness of the interventions did not vary as a function of the duration of victimization ( $OR = .93, p = .594$ )<sup>1</sup>.

### **Discussion**

To our knowledge, the present study is the first to directly compare the effectiveness of two different approaches of tackling cases of school bullying. Although previous studies had pointed out the limited success of adult interventions in specific cases of school bullying (e.g., Smith & Shu, 2000), victims involved in the indicated actions of the KiVa program reported that bullying stopped in 78.2% of cases. The positive outcomes of these interventions were observed both in primary and secondary schools, suggesting that even adolescent bullies can be responsive to adult interventions and individual discussions with students involved in bullying incidents should not be restricted to young children. Importantly, we did not find any evidence that one of the two approaches – Confronting and Non-Confronting – would be overall more successful than the other, after controlling for the effects of grade level, duration of victimization and type of aggression. Rather, we found that the relative effectiveness of each approach was conditional on two factors: grade level and duration of victimization. It should be noted that, in these significant interactions, the Confronting Approach was either equally effective or more effective, but never less effective, than the Non-Confronting Approach.

Among adolescents, better results were obtained with the Confronting Approach, and in primary school, there was no significant difference in effectiveness between the two approaches. This finding may be related to developmental changes in moral reasoning or perspective-taking skills. The ability to take the perspective of others and to sympathize with the distress of others has been found to increase with age (Davis and Franzoi, 1991; Hoffman, 2000). Bullying by younger children may be more likely than that by youth to be caused by deficiencies in those capacities, which might explain why the Non-Confronting Approach – which focuses on raising awareness of the victim's suffering – tended to be more effective in primary school than in secondary school. In the absence of such deficiencies (i.e., if the perpetrator of bullying is

already fully conscious of his harmful power over the victim), attempts at raising his empathy may be ineffective, in which case it is possible that only direct strategies work.

The Confronting Approach yielded better results than the other approach when victimization had lasted one month or less. In cases where the victimization had been going on for at least 2 months, no significant difference between the two approaches was found. In situations where bullying has become chronic, it is likely that direct confrontation, which is the most common strategy for teachers (Rigby & Bauman, 2010), has already been tried and has failed. This may explain why confronting strategies are less effective in such cases than in cases of more recent bullying.

The type of aggression used did not moderate the effectiveness of either approach. It is noteworthy however that among the four forms of aggression investigated, only social exclusion had a significant influence on the outcome of the interventions. Bullying was less likely to cease when it involved the rejection of the child from the peer group. Although both telling lies/spreading rumors and social exclusion tend to be covert forms of aggression, telling lies, along with hitting and name-calling, is an active form of aggression. Social exclusion, on the other hand is characterized by an absence of behavior - not talking to, not playing with and/or not looking at someone - and ignoring someone is not against school rules. These differences might explain our findings. Getting children to cease a forbidden behavior that can be identified may be easier than getting them to start acting in a more positive, friendly way towards someone they dislike. This may indicate that new tools need to be developed to tackle social exclusion specifically.

### **Limitations**

Some important limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting findings of the current study. One limitation lies in the timing of our measure of effectiveness, which was based

on the victim's report about 2 weeks after the intervention. Therefore, we only assessed the short-term effectiveness of the discussions. The success rate that we obtained (78.2%) may not have been as high if we had asked the victims to evaluate their situation several months later. It is conceivable that one of the approaches may have turned out to be more effective than the other in the long run, although no main effect of type of approach was found in the short term.

Furthermore, victims' reports about their situations during the follow-up discussions may not be perfectly reliable. Their responses were not anonymous as they were reported to the adult filling out the form and the adult was a member of the school team who had handled the case. There is a possibility that victims reported that the bullying had stopped so that an intervention they perceived as inefficient, or even harmful, would stop. A desire to please the adult may also have hindered their sincerity and inflated the overall success rate of the interventions - though it is unlikely that social desirability bias would have influenced findings regarding the comparison between the two approaches. In order to reduce social desirability bias in such cases, future evaluations may benefit from having victims' reporting about their situation to an adult other than a member of the school team. Fully anonymous reports would be difficult to implement however as changes in the bullying situation must be monitored in some way by the school authorities.

The relatively high proportion (44%) of intervention schools that did not return any form to document these interventions is also a source of concern, especially as bullying rates in these schools were comparable to the rates in the other schools. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, the KiVa school teams in these schools may have handled cases of bullying but did not take the time to fill out the forms and send them back. It is of course possible that the outcome of cases that were not documented was mostly negative and the success of the interventions was thus overestimated in our study.

Second, a high number of victims may go unrecognized by the school personnel. A study by our research group on the KiVa dataset has identified a sample of “stable” children (children who self-reported being a victim of bullying before the implementation of the program and 5 months after it started) and found that only 23.5% of them received attention from the school staff in the form of these targeted discussions (Haataja, Sainio, Turtonen, & Salmivalli, 2013). This means that our findings are based on a small percentage of all victimized children in the sample. One reason for this lack of recognition is that many teachers do not perceive the bullying taking place in their schools and underestimate the number of victims (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2007). In addition, many victimized children are reluctant to expose their plight to adults, probably for fear that the situation will get worse or they will not be understood. In order to increase victims’ willingness and ability to disclose, a function has been added to the KiVa computer game that allows children to report being victimized by sending an online message to their school team (i.e., without being seen by peers or having to talk directly to someone).

One should also keep in mind that the success of each approach probably depends heavily on adults’ endorsement of the approach. Direct confrontation of bullies is more typical among school professionals: According to a survey of teachers (Rigby & Bauman, 2010), virtually everyone (97%) believed that it should be made clear to the bully that bullying behavior was not tolerated. Being endorsed by a majority of school personnel, the Confronting Approach may have been easier to use for adults. They may have felt less comfortable using a non-confronting strategy, which is considered less intuitive and implies a form of deception (as the adult must not state that the bully committed the bullying despite knowing that he did). The data analyzed in the present study came from schools that had been instructed to use a specific approach. After this pilot phase, when KiVa became available to all Finnish comprehensive schools, the schools were free to choose the approach they preferred. A recent survey (from the KiVa research group,

unpublished data) has revealed that 30% of the schools implementing KiVa chose to use exclusively the Confronting Approach and only 6% chose to use exclusively the Non-confronting Approach, while the others chose to use both, or some other approach. We see this as an indication that the Finnish teachers who took part in the evaluation phase of KiVa felt more at ease with direct, confrontational strategies than with the Non-Confronting Approach. The effectiveness of the discussions, as reported by school teams, has been found to be similar for the two approaches.

Finally, the results of this study should be interpreted with the knowledge that these indicated actions were performed within the context of a whole school anti-bullying program. The universal actions of KiVa, such as student lessons and computer game on bullying, have certainly created a climate that contributed to enhance the effectiveness of interventions in individual cases of bullying. It remains uncertain whether the outcomes of these discussions would have been positive to such a high degree in the absence of a strong commitment from all the school personnel for the reduction of bullying.

### **Future Research**

Individual discussions with bullies and victims are generally one component of larger intervention programs, but evaluations typically concern the program as a whole. It remains unknown whether this specific component adds to the effects obtained, or whether similar effects would be obtained without it. One important avenue for future research on the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions would be to disentangle the effects of these individual discussions – regardless of the method used – from the effects of the other components of whole-school programs. This would require large-scale randomized controlled trials with two experimental conditions: schools implementing all program components and schools implementing the whole program minus the individual discussions. As anti-bullying programs do not all use the same

strategy for handling cases of bullying, the separate evaluation of the effectiveness of these targeted interventions would facilitate comparisons between programs.

Future studies would also greatly advance the field by comparing more than two approaches of dealing with bullies and victims. For instance, confronting and non-confronting approaches could be investigated along with restorative justice practices (Braithwaite, 2004) and work focused on victims (such as self-assertiveness enhancement). Replications of studies investigating multiple strategies, along with their potential moderators, would give a much more precise understanding of the best anti-bullying methods than what can be inferred from the existing literature.

There is a tendency in the media and in scientific papers alike, to oppose one anti-bullying strategy to another; for example, restorative justice is often presented as an alternative to zero tolerance policies and the no-blame approach generally appears as a reaction to punitive measures. Unfortunately, this tends to hide the fact that each strategy is implemented in many different ways, jeopardizing the reliability of between-method comparisons. Importantly, it suggests that one method must necessarily outrank the other, thus taking attention away from the fact that different methods may be equally useful though not equally suited to all cases. Future research would benefit from going beyond the search for the best overall strategy and focusing on the identification of moderating factors, so as to provide practitioners with the most precise recommendations for each specific case of bullying.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> As the main effect of duration of victimization was included in the model, the unequal proportion of cases across the two approaches at the various levels of duration (see Measures, p. 16) is not likely to bias the effects obtained. In fact, when we tested for the main effect of approach, without controlling for duration, the Confronting Approach was significantly more effective ( $p = .010$ ) than the Non-Confronting Approach. However, once the main effect of duration was included in the model, there was no significant effect of approach ( $p = .085$ ).

Table 1

*Results of logistic regression predicting effectiveness of the intervention (likelihood that bullying had stopped at follow-up)*

|                           | Model 1: Main effects |          |          | Model 2: Interaction effects |            |          |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------|------------------------------|------------|----------|
|                           | OR                    | 95% CI   | <i>p</i> | OR                           | 95% CI     | <i>p</i> |
| Approach                  | 1.67                  | .93-3.00 | .085     | .46                          | .08-2.71   | .391     |
| Grade level               | .86                   | .49-1.54 | .620     | .44                          | .20- .97   | .041     |
| Duration of victimization | .79                   | .64- .96 | .021     | .95                          | .72-1.26   | .731     |
| Aggression: Hitting       | .78                   | .44-1.39 | .399     | .84                          | .39-1.83   | .663     |
| Aggression: Name-calling  | .56                   | .26-1.20 | .134     | .36                          | .12-1.09   | .071     |
| Aggression: Exclusion     | .46                   | .23- .89 | .022     | .33                          | .12- .93   | .035     |
| Aggression: Telling lies  | 1.33                  | .56-3.14 | .515     | 2.35                         | .56-9.85   | .244     |
| Approach*Grade Level      |                       |          |          | 4.41                         | 1.34-14.57 | .015     |
| Approach*Duration         |                       |          |          | .63                          | .41-.96    | .032     |
| Approach*Hitting          |                       |          |          | .89                          | .27-2.93   | .845     |
| Approach*Name-calling     |                       |          |          | 2.29                         | .48-10.93  | .300     |
| Approach*Exclusion        |                       |          |          | 1.62                         | .40-6.52   | .497     |
| Approach*Telling lies     |                       |          |          | .42                          | .07-2.67   | .359     |

*Note:* The two interactions significant at .05 remain significant at this level when non-significant interactions are excluded from the model.

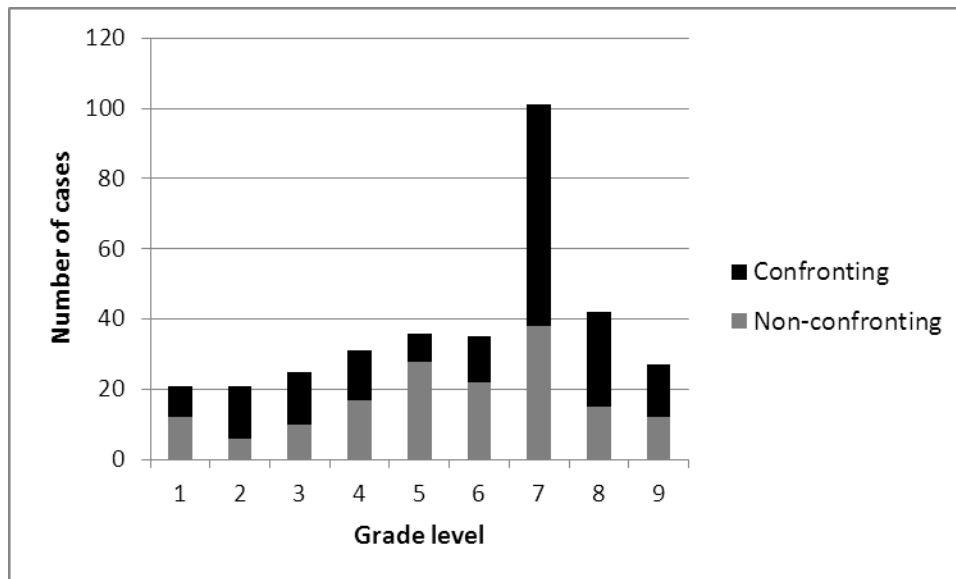


*Figure 1.* Frequency distribution of cases by grade level and approach used.

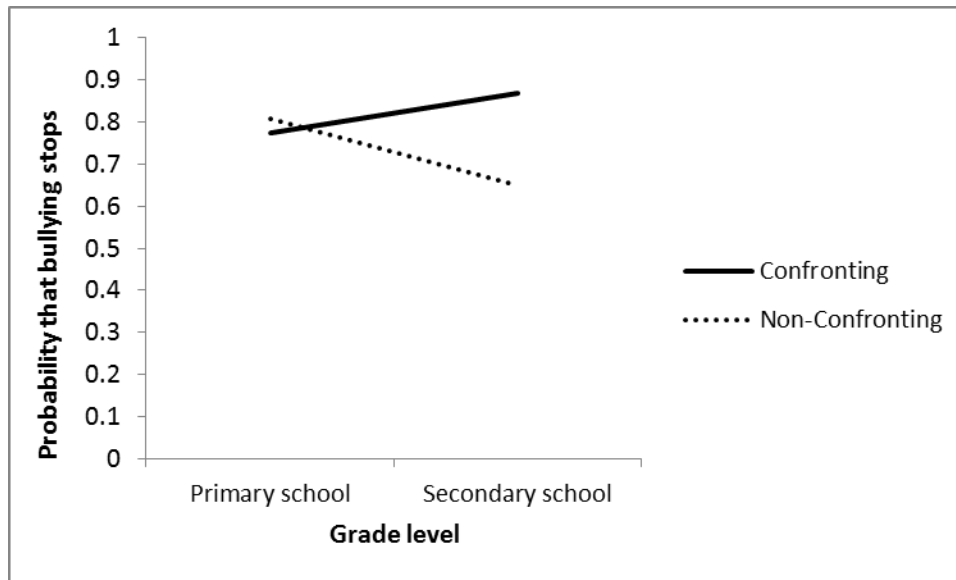


*Figure 2.* Interaction between approach and grade level in predicting the probability that bullying stopped after the intervention.

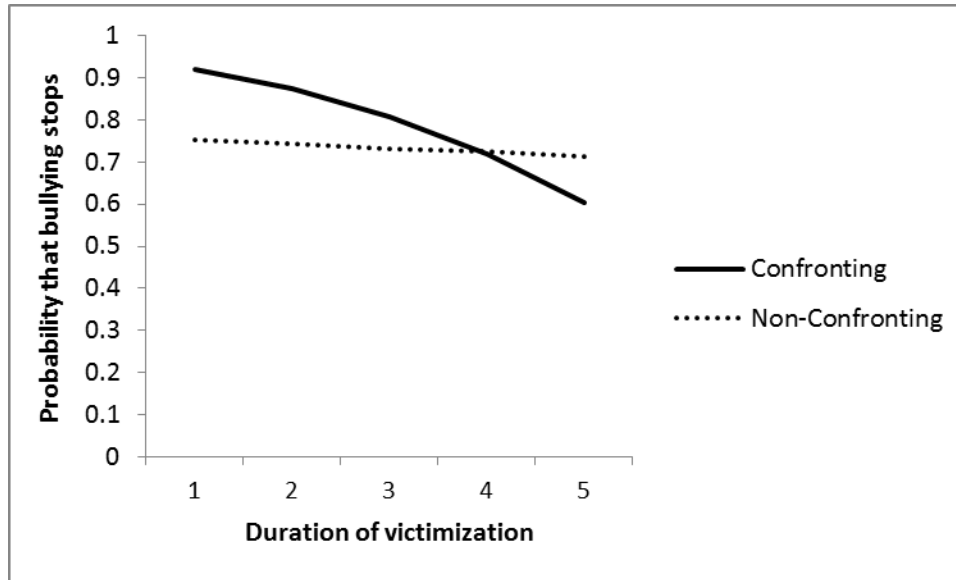


*Figure 3.* Interaction between approach and duration of victimization in predicting the probability that bullying stopped after the intervention (1 = one week or two, 2 = a month, 3 = two to six months, 4 = six to 12 months, 5 = more than a year).