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# A Bystander Bullying Psychoeducation Program with Middle School Students: A Preliminary Report

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# A Bystander Bullying Psychoeducation Program With Middle School Students: A Preliminary Report



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This study evaluated the effectiveness of a brief, stand-alone bystander bullying psychoeducation program for middle school students. The purpose of the program was to train students to take action as peer advocates. Pre- and post-tests indicated that after completing the 90-minute psychoeducation program, students reported an increase in their ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, knowledge of bystander intervention strategies, and general confidence intervening as peer advocates. Implications for school counselors are discussed, including (1) taking a leadership role in program implementation, (2) having access to a brief, cost-effective bystander training intervention, and (3) applying the ASCA model to a bullying intervention. Directions for further research are discussed.

**Keywords:** bullying, bystander, middle school, peer advocates, school counselors, psychoeducation

Bullying is a prevalent problem associated with emotional and academic consequences in schools nationwide. Because bullying escalates during middle school, middle school counselors need to be equipped with strategies to prevent bullying behaviors. Comprehensive, school-wide interventions are considered the standard for practice; however, they can be difficult to implement. Additionally, there is evidence that programs that do not place a high demand on school time and resources may be effective. Stand-alone bystander programs that train students to be peer advocates provide a promising approach to bullying intervention. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a stand-alone bystander psychoeducation program on training students to identify bullying behavior, understand appropriate peer-advocate strategies and feel confident in intervening when they observe bullying behavior.

## Prevalence and Negative Effects Associated With Bullying

Bullying is recognized as one of the major current problems that youth face (American Educational Research Association, 2013). According to national survey data, approximately one in three students between the ages of 12 and 18 report being bullied at school (Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). School personnel indicate that bullying is a problem, with 78% reporting that incidents of bullying have either increased or remained the same over time (School Safety Advocacy Council, 2012). In addition, bullying is associated with both short- and long-term psychosocial and academic difficulties. Students who are bullied report anxiety, low self-esteem and depression, a negative attitude toward school, decreased school attendance and lower grades (Rueger & Jenkins, 2014), lower academic achievement (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), and suicidal ideation and attempts (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, &

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Gould, 2007). Furthermore, students who are bullied are at higher risk of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (Nielsen, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthiesen, & Magerøy, 2015) and depression later in life (Tfofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). In contrast, students who bully are more likely to use addictive substances in adolescence (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000) and to experience a variety of problems later in life such as higher incidences of antisocial behavior, criminal violence and contact with the police (Renda, Vassallo, & Edwards, 2011).

In addition to students involved in bullying as a target or as a bully, 70% of students report observing bullying at school (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). These students, often referred to as bystanders, report a myriad of negative symptomology including somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, hostility and substance use (Rivers et al., 2009). In fact, compared to students who are bullied, bystanders are at greater risk of substance abuse; and compared to students who bully, bystanders are at higher risk of negative nonclinical outcomes (Rivers et al., 2009). Thus, given that bullying can have negative consequences for students, even when they are not directly involved as a target or a bully, it is important for school counselors to consider involving bystanders in interventions or psychoeducation programs.

### **Bullying in Middle School and the Role of the School Counselor**

Currently, all 50 states in the United States have laws governing bullying that require school personnel (administrators, teachers and staff) to take action to intervene and protect students (Stopbullying.gov, 2015). Therefore, it is important for school counselors to be aware of bullying and its impact, as well as to have access to effective interventions. This is particularly important for middle school counselors as the prevalence of bullying increases during the transition to middle school, with 32.7% of middle school students reporting being bullied compared to 28.7% of students in primary school (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). During middle school, students perceive aggression less negatively than in elementary school (Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000) and aggressive behavior toward peers increases (Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2011). Additionally, during this time, peer relationships are highly valued and there are disruptions in previously established group affiliations (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). As a result, students may use bullying as a vehicle to gain control and status in an effort to re-establish their social hierarchy in a manner that is beneficial to them (Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2011). Given the importance of peer relationships in middle school and the need for students to establish themselves among their peers, it is helpful for school counselors to take on a leadership role in helping students navigate through these developmental issues.

According to the American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA; 2012), the role of the school counselor has changed significantly, evolving into a leadership position as a systemic change agent based on a comprehensive school counseling program. Thus, counselors are in a heightened position to address bullying. School counselors are seen as leaders promoting student achievement through the delivery of school-wide initiatives that support the academic, career and personal/social development of all students (ASCA, 2012), which includes providing a safe learning environment, exclusive of bullying. Furthermore, accountability measures require school counselors to ensure their programs are in line with the school's mission and the academic, career and personal/social developmental needs of students (Education Trust, 2005). Therefore, implementing a bullying program that empowers students through the development of knowledge, skills and confidence is essential for comprehensive middle school counseling programs. Given that peer relationships are highly valued in middle school, it makes sense to incorporate a relational component in psychoeducational programs.

## **The Role of the Bystander**

Researchers have identified four types of bystander roles: (a) “assistants” who actively and directly help the bully victimize a target, (b) “reinforcers” who laugh at or simply witness the situation, (c) “outsiders” who do not take sides and often disengage or walk away from the group in order to dismiss the situation, and (d) “defenders” who intervene and console the target of bullying (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996, p. 15). Researchers have found that when bystanders reinforce the bully, bullying behavior increases (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). In contrast, when bystanders intervene, they are able to stop bullying behavior within 10–12 seconds 57% of the time (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). Similarly, within a classroom setting, when bystanders defend the target, bullying behavior decreases (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Because research findings indicate that when bystanders intervene they are effective at stopping bullying behaviors, focusing on bystander behavior is an important aspect of school-based interventions and educational programs.

## **Comprehensive, School-Wide Bystander Intervention Programs**

Because bullying occurs within the context of peer-based interactions (Hawkins et al., 2001) and most students are bystanders at some point in time (Rivers et al., 2009), bystander interventions are an important component of school-wide intervention programs (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). The purpose of bystander interventions is to work with students to teach them to intervene when they observe a bullying situation (Polanin et al., 2012). Recent meta-analyses and reviews of the intervention literature support the effectiveness of comprehensive, school-wide bullying intervention programs that include bystander interventions (Bradshaw, 2015; Polanin et al., 2012).

For example, KiVa, a Finnish acronym for *Kiusaamista Vastaan*, “against bullying” (Kärnä et al., 2011), is a comprehensive, school-wide program focused on bystander intervention (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). There are two key components to KiVa: universal actions and indicated actions. Universal actions include training all students within the classroom context about bullying and how to positively impact it through a variety of activities such as discussions, group discussions, role-plays, short films about bullying, and online games and instruction. Indicated actions involve engaging school personnel and students in intervening when an incident of bullying occurs. The intervention consists of several initial staff and teacher meetings, followed by a staff meeting with the bully, a staff meeting with the target, and selecting key students to meet with the target to provide support. Program implementation requires ten 90-minute classroom lessons for students, a two-day training for school personnel, the formation of an implementation team that works with classroom teachers to address indication actions, educating parents and completing annual evaluations. Consequently, KiVa was associated with significant reductions in bullying and victimization among students (Garandeau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2014).

In a recent study evaluating mechanisms of change, improving bystander behavior in bullying situations was a significant mediator in counteracting bullying (Saarento, Boulton, & Salmivalli, 2015). Reducing students’ tendency to reinforce the bully appears to be an effective strategy. The program, however, can be difficult for many schools to implement. First, implementation requires a licensed partner who is an educational expert and can make a long-term commitment to program implementation (KiVa Anti-Bullying Program, 2014). Additionally, the program requires 900 minutes of teacher-delivered instruction in the classroom.

Bully-Proofing (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager & Short-Camilli, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) is another example of a comprehensive, school-wide program that involves training administrators, staff, teachers, bystanders and parents. Bully-Proofing includes (1) increasing awareness of bullying, (2) working with targets to increase protective behaviors and skills, (3) working with students

who bully to change their behavior, and (4) changing the school climate to increase peer bystander interventions (Garrity et al., 2004b, 2004c; Menard & Grotmeter, 2014). As part of the Bully-Proofing classroom curriculum, teachers train students to intervene when they observe bullying (Garrity et al., 2004b). Students learn the CARES strategies which include, “creative problem solving,” “adult help,” “relate and join,” “empathy,” and “stand up and speak out” (Garrity et al., 2004b, p. 117). Students are trained to use these strategies when they observe bullying behavior. Implementation of Bully-Proofing includes administration of classroom management and rules, parent information and training, a minimum of 15 hours of teacher preparation, and 270 days of program implementation for students and teachers (Menard & Grotmeter, 2014).

In a recent study examining the effectiveness of Bully-Proofing (Menard & Grotmeter, 2014), researchers found the program was associated with decreased rates of victimization and perpetration relative to a control group. Additionally, students participating in the Bully-Proofing program reported higher perceptions of school safety during program implementation. Similarly to KiVa, however, the program requires a significant commitment of school resources as it is time intensive and relies on teacher instruction for program delivery.

### **Realistic Stand-Alone Bystander Interventions**

Although comprehensive, school-wide programs including bystander components are effective in reducing bullying (Bradshaw, 2015; Polanin et al., 2012), many schools do not have the resources to implement time-intensive, multi-component programs. Thus, it may not be practical for schools to adopt comprehensive school-wide programs as they can be difficult to implement due to required resources, including time allocation and potential cost of materials, which is often dependent upon the size of the school and the school’s specific needs. Therefore, it is important to realistically identify brief, cost-effective programs to promote school adoption and implementation.

Although limited, research on brief, school-based interventions provides preliminary evidence that stand-alone bystander programs are a promising alternative to comprehensive, school-wide programs. In one study examining the effectiveness of a brief, school-based program with a bystander component, researchers investigated the effects of training students from available classrooms during three 30-minute online sessions (Evers, Prochaska, Van Marter, Johnson, & Prochaska, 2007). A 10-page family guide and staff guide were also provided to participants’ families and teachers. Results showed that students who received the intervention reported a decrease in bullying participation and identifying with the role of bully, target and passive bystander (Evers et al., 2007). In another study, researchers adapted KiVa, focusing only on the teacher-delivered curriculum segment of the intervention and shortening that piece from 20 hours to 8 hours (Andreou, Didaskalou, & Vlachou, 2008). The researchers found positive short-term outcomes regarding students’ attitudes toward bullies and victims, perceived efficacy in intervening in bully-victim incidents, and actual rates of intervening behaviors.

Although brief, school-based interventions with bystander training are a promising strategy for bullying prevention and intervention, there is a need for further research into programs that provide education to increase student ability to identify what bullying behavior looks like, strategies they can use to intervene when they observe bullying and the confidence to intervene. It also is imperative to develop school-based interventions that can be implemented with limited time and resources. In contrast to school-wide interventions, brief, school-based interventions with bystander training can be implemented on a smaller scale and have the potential to be cost effective. Following ASCA’s promotion of a leadership role for school counselors as systemic change agents, there also is a need for further research shifting implementation from teachers to school counselors in interventions

specific to bullying. Given the demands already placed on teachers, a leadership role in program implementation can be better suited for school counselors. This research would form a foundation for establishing school counselors as bullying prevention and intervention leaders or liaisons, promoting program implementation at their school.

This study serves as a first step in extending the literature by evaluating a brief, stand-alone bystander psychoeducation program in a middle school setting. In contrast to other brief, school-based programs, we chose to focus exclusively on bystander psychoeducation. We also were interested in developing a counselor-based psychoeducation program developed to teach students to identify bullying behaviors and intervene as “defenders.” To meet this aim, we created a new program, STAC (“stealing the show,” “turning it over,” “accompanying others,” and “coaching compassion”). STAC is a modification of the CARES bystander component of Bully-Proofing described above. STAC was adapted for school counselors to coordinate program implementation without relying on teacher instruction. The aim of the training is to teach students to identify bullying at school and intervene as peer advocates and to develop confidence with the STAC strategies. STAC is comprised of a didactic and experiential component described in detail in the psychoeducation program section. The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether or not the STAC psychoeducation program (a) increases student ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, (b) increases student knowledge of specific strategies that can be used to intervene appropriately, and (c) increases student confidence in their ability to intervene.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Students from two Northwestern schools were recruited over two academic semesters. Students were recruited from a student body of 992 sixth through ninth grade students. One school counselor from each school coordinated program implementation. The school counselor at each school determined how many students per grade level to train as peer advocates. They made their determination based on the assumption that the training would be conducted annually, and that the number of peer advocates would increase over time. The school counselors at each school decided that if approximately 10% of the student body were trained annually, this would be sufficient to help shift the school bullying culture over time. Additionally, they made their determination based on the number of students they felt they could adequately support as peer advocates. After determining the number of students to train, a school counselor in collaboration with key teachers and staff at each school selected between 8–14 students per grade level to participate in the training. The counselors selected a total of 78 students who belonged to different peer groups and were perceived as possessing positive personal qualities such as maturity, leadership and responsibility.

After students were selected, the school counselor at each school briefly met with each student to discuss potential interest in the training. The school counselor emphasized that they were chosen because adults in the school believed they had positive qualities and would make a difference. Of these, 75 students expressed interest in being part of the training. Interested students were sent home with an informed consent to be signed by a parent or caregiver and returned to the school counselor. A school counselor at each school followed up with a phone call to a parent or caregiver when necessary. Of these 75 parents or caregivers, 74 provided consent. After the school counselor collected the signed parental informed consent, she met with each student briefly to explain the research in more detail and collect student assent. All students with parental or caregiver consent assented to participate in the research.

The final sample consisted of 74 students (51.4% female and 48.6% male), 49 from one school and 25 from the other school. Participants ranged in age from 12–15 ( $M = 13.42$  and  $SD = .90$ ), and were primarily Caucasian (89.2%), with 4.1% African American, 4.1% Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 2.6% Hispanic. The sample was similar to the total student population, with the exception that Hispanic students were underrepresented in the study sample with 2.6% of students reporting their ethnicity as Hispanic compared to 8.6% in the student population. Power calculations indicated the current sample size should yield power of  $\geq 0.80$  to detect a small effect size.

### **Procedures**

A separate psychoeducation training was conducted at each school. Students at each school completed a 90-minute training during classroom time. The program, which is described in the Psychoeducation Program section below, was held in the school's library or an available classroom and was conducted by graduate students in a master's in counseling program. Two graduate students conducted the audiovisual presentation, and an additional two students were available to help facilitate activities and role-plays discussed below in the Psychoeducation Program section. Participants completed a pre- and post-test to measure the effectiveness of the training. The pre-test was conducted immediately prior to the training and the post-test was conducted immediately after the 90-minute training. All study procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board as well as the school district's review board.

### **Instruments**

The Student-Advocates Pre- and Post-Scale was developed by the researchers to measure the effectiveness of the STAC training. The questionnaire is comprised of 11 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from "I totally disagree" to "I totally agree." Items were developed to measure the effectiveness of the training in increasing ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, knowledge of STAC strategies and confidence in intervening to stop bullying. The following items measured ability to identify different types of bullying: "I know what verbal bullying looks like," "I know what social/emotional bullying looks like," "I know what cyberbullying looks like," and "I know what physical bullying looks like." Knowledge of STAC strategies was measured by the following items: "I know how to use humor to get attention away from the student being bullied," "I know how to reach out to the student being bullied," "I know how to ask for help from an adult and report bullying at my school," and "I know how to offer suggestions for empathy when someone is bullying a student." Finally, confidence in intervening items included: "I feel confident in my ability to do something helpful to decrease bullying at my school," "I feel comfortable being an advocate to stop bullying at my school," and "I feel like I can make a positive difference against bullying at my school." Finally, a Total Scale was created by summing all 11 items. Cronbach's alphas for the Total Scale was  $\alpha = .77$ .

Content validity of the questionnaire was established through professional review of the items. The three professional reviewers selected were a school counselor, a school teacher and a university faculty member with experience in instrument design. The items were generated by the first author to reflect the content of the training. The first author then elicited feedback from the three professionals. The feedback included revising language and formatting to be developmentally appropriate for this age group. The three reviewers agreed that the items appeared to measure the three areas described above. The pre-test was administered immediately prior to the training, and the post-test was administered immediately after the training. The pre- and post-tests were administered 90 minutes apart.

## **Psychoeducation Program**

The first author, a school counselor, and two graduate students enrolled in a master's in counseling program collaborated to develop the STAC intervention. The primary purpose of the intervention is to train peer advocates to recognize bullying and possess the knowledge and confidence to intervene appropriately. The leadership role of the school counselor and the collaborative implementation of the STAC intervention are integral components of school-wide changes and are supported by the themes of the ASCA National Model, which includes leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, as well as systemic changes (ASCA, 2012). The intervention is intended to increase student knowledge, provide skill-building opportunities, and increase confidence, all of which support the ASCA developmental domains of personal/social, academic and career growth (ASCA, 2012) for all students overtime.

The STAC intervention is an adaption of the Bully-Proofing CARES strategies (Garrity et al., 2004b). The CARES strategies were modified and the acronym was renamed STAC to accommodate the modifications and provide a simple mnemonic device for students. The first modification provided a strategy that focuses directly on utilizing humor as an intervention. This is important because humor is associated with popularity and social likeability in adolescence (Closson, 2009; Quatman, Sokolik, & Smith, 2000), thus providing students with a positive strategy for establishing themselves within their social hierarchy. Therefore, the CARES strategy "creative problem solving" was modified to "stealing the show" to focus directly on using humor to intervene. The CARES strategies "adult help" and "stand up and speak out" were kept, but renamed "turning it over" and "coaching compassion," respectively. These strategies were renamed so that a new acronym that included "stealing the show" could be created that would be easy for students to recall. Finally, the CARES strategies "relate and join" and "empathy" were kept, but combined because the researchers did not want to separate empathy from the action of befriending or consoling the target, renaming them "accompany others."

The CARES training also was adapted for school counselors to become leaders in implementation, without relying on teachers instructing the curriculum. Instead, counseling graduate students provided the training, which included a didactic and experiential component. Two counselor education students conducted the didactic component of the training, and six graduate student trainers were available to facilitate the experiential component. The same two students conducted the audiovisual presentation at each school, while a different group of graduate students facilitated the experiential role-play component. However, the number of graduate students present to conduct the program was the same at both schools. There were a total of eight graduate students per training; two to conduct the audiovisual presentation and six to facilitate the role-plays. The two students who conducted the didactic component of the training are the third and fourth authors and helped develop the STAC strategies. The researchers trained the graduate student trainers. More specifically, the two graduate students who conducted the didactic component practiced the audiovisual presentation on their own. Then they presented to the first author and received feedback. The two presenters practiced for a total of 4 hours, one of which was with the first author. The first, third and fourth authors also trained two additional graduate students per grade level who volunteered to facilitate the experiential component. The focus of their preparation was to become proficient with the STAC strategies. Furthermore, the researchers also discussed behavioral management strategies to utilize during the training with the middle school students if necessary. The researchers provided the graduate student volunteers with the STAC strategies and role-plays ahead of time. Then, the researchers met with the additional trainers for 3 hours during two separate meetings. During those meetings, the researchers presented an overview of the STAC training, discussed the STAC strategies and role-plays, and discussed behavioral management strategies for engaging



middle school students. Behavioral strategies included discussing behaviors graduate students could expect to observe and how they could respond positively through strategies such as waiting patiently for students to quiet down, counting backwards to gain students' attention, and engaging students by saying "if you can hear me, high-five your neighbor." Additionally, the researchers encouraged graduate students to move closer to middle school students when addressing them, engage respectfully with students, and utilize developmentally appropriate language and tone of voice.

**STAC Strategies.** Trainers taught students four strategies they could utilize when they observed bullying at school. The intent of the strategies was to provide peer advocates with a vehicle for expressing qualities and skills they possessed to engage with peers in a positive manner to intervene when they observed bullying situations. Trainers indicated that peer advocates did not have to utilize all four strategies. Instead, trainers encouraged peer advocates to focus on developing the strategies that seemed best suited for their personality and felt natural to them.

*Stealing the Show.* This involves using humor to turn students' attention away from the bullying situation. Peer advocates can implement this strategy in a manner that seems natural to them and in line with their personality. This way the intervention feels authentic and the advocate does not stand out in the peer group. Trainers indicated that peer advocates could utilize their sense of humor when they observed bullying to displace the attention away from the target. Trainers provided examples such as telling a funny joke or pretending to trip by acting silly.

*Turning it Over.* "Turning it over" involves informing an adult about the situation and asking for help. During the training, students identify safe adults at school who can help. Students are taught to always "turn it over" if there is physical bullying taking place or if they are unsure as to how to intervene.

*Accompany Others.* This involves the peer-advocate reaching out to the student who was targeted to communicate that what happened is not acceptable, that the student who was targeted is not alone at school, and that the peer-advocate cares about them. This can be accomplished subtly by spending time with the student who was bullied and inviting them to participate in a shared activity such as playing basketball or going for a walk. The strategy also can be implemented more directly by helping the student process his or her feelings about being bullied while offering support. Trainers taught this to students by providing examples of how they could utilize this strategy such as approaching a peer after they were targeted and inviting them to go for a walk during recess.

*Coaching Compassion.* "Coaching compassion" involves gently confronting the bully either during or after the bullying incident and communicating that his or her behavior is unacceptable. Additionally, the peer-advocate encourages the student who bullied to consider what it would feel like to be the target in the situation, aimed at fostering empathy toward the target. Peer advocates are encouraged to consider implementing "coaching compassion" when they have a relationship already established with the student who bullied, or if the student who bullied is in a younger grade and the peer-advocate believes the bully will respect them.

**Didactic Component.** The didactic component of the training was 50 minutes and included an ice-breaker exercise, an audiovisual presentation and hands-on activities to engage the students in the learning process. As the students entered the room where the training was conducted, a trainer handed them a card with a symbol on it. Then, students were asked to sit at the table where the symbol was displayed. This was done so that students had an opportunity to sit next to others whom they may not regularly interact with at school. After the trainers introduced themselves and welcomed students to

the training, they facilitated an ice-breaker exercise. Trainers asked students to look into a brown bag for a few seconds that contained random items such as crayons, pencils, and paperclips without any specific directions. After all students had an opportunity to look in the bag, the trainers asked students to recall what they observed. Generally, students were somewhat confused and could not recall all the items. At that point, the trainers explained that it is helpful to know what to look for in specific situations in order to be effective; therefore, the goal of the training was to help students become aware of what to look for to identify and intervene when they observe bullying at school.

After the ice-breaker, trainers conducted an audiovisual presentation teaching students about (a) the definition and different types of bullying (i.e., physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying), (b) the different roles associated with bullying (i.e., target, bully, and passive and active bystander), (c) the negative consequences associated with bullying, and (d) the STAC strategies for intervening. To maintain students' attention and engage them in the learning process, graduate students incorporated small group activities throughout the audiovisual presentation. After the trainers introduced the different types of bullying, they provided students at each table with one posterboard, markers, pencils, and crayons, and asked them to write or draw examples of bullying they have observed at school. Each table was asked to address a different type of bullying (i.e., physical, verbal, relational, or cyberbullying) within four different contexts including (a) their classroom; (b) areas of the school or periods of time when adults often are not monitoring (e.g., hallways, staircases, bathrooms, and before and after school); (c) physical education class; and (d) recess. After the small groups completed their work, trainers asked a representative from each group to share their poster with the larger group.

Next, after presenting the negative consequences associated with bullying, trainers provided students with a blank piece of paper and asked them to write down a bullying situation they have observed at school without including any names. Then, trainers invited students to crumple the paper up, and "throw" it at the trainers. The aim of this activity was to provide levity after presenting information that could potentially cause some level of emotional distress for students and for the researchers to learn more about the different types of bullying students observe at school. The presenters informed the students prior to the activity that they would randomly select a few examples to be shared with the group. Finally, the audiovisual component of the training concluded with a discussion of the STAC strategies.

**Experiential Role-Play Component.** The experiential component of the training lasted 25 minutes. After discussing the STAC strategies, trainers divided students into small groups by grade level and practiced utilizing the STAC strategies through set role-plays. Role-plays included hypothetical bullying situations that students can encounter at school. For example, "at lunch break, some of the boys you are friends with love to 'table top' people. While they are running, the boys will dive in front of them with the intention of tripping them. Often times the people they are targeting end up falling flat on their face and really get hurt, even though they pretend it was funny. How can you use your STAC strategies here?" The role-plays were developed in conjunction with the school counselors at the two schools where the trainings were conducted.

Trainers asked for student volunteers within each small group to act out the different characters embedded within the role-play. While one of the trainers briefly practiced the role-play with the students who volunteered, another trainer engaged the remaining students in preparing for a different role-play. Once the student volunteers were ready, they acted out the role-play. After they completed the enactment, the other students in the group were asked (a) what type of bullying was portrayed and (b) what STAC strategies could they utilize? After discussing the answers to the questions above, the trainers asked for another student volunteer to join the role-play and act as a peer-advocate utilizing

the STAC strategies to intervene. After the group conducted the role-play a second time with the peer-advocate intervening, trainers facilitated a discussion processing the STAC strategy utilized and suggesting other strategies and the possibility of linking more than one strategy together. Students practiced all strategies through four different role-plays covering the different types of bullying discussed during the didactic component of the training. Each role-play lasted approximately 5 minutes. All peer advocates who participated in the training were part of a small group and invited to be an actor in a role-play or practice utilizing a strategy.

**Training Conclusion.** The training concluded with the small groups coming together and each student sharing his or her favorite STAC strategy, signing a petition indicating “bullying stops with me,” and receiving a certificate of participation. The training conclusion lasted 15 minutes. After the STAC training, the school counselors at each school provided ongoing informal support to students, including checking in with them individually or in small groups.

## Results

Data were examined for extreme cases that might impact the results of the analyses including skew and kurtosis. We did not identify any outliers and all variables were within the normal range. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to examine the change in each item and the total scale score from pre-training to post-training (we selected the paired sample t-test as it is the appropriate statistical test to use when comparing means in correlated, matched pairs samples). All analyses were conducted at  $p < .01$  to control for Type I error.

Means, standard deviations,  $t$  values,  $p$  values, and Cohen’s  $d$  values are presented in Table 1. Results indicated participants reported significant increases on all items with the exception of identification of what physical bullying looks like. Examination of the means suggests a ceiling effect; that is, students’ baseline ability to identify physical bullying was already quite high ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = .49$ ). There also was a significant change for the total scale score from pre-test to post-test. As seen in Table 1, with the exception of the physical bullying item, all effect sizes were in the medium to large range. Examination of the effect sizes revealed that the STAC strategy “asking for help” and two confidence items “I feel comfortable being an advocate to stop bullying at my school” and “I feel like I can make a positive difference against bullying at my school” had the lowest effect sizes among the items.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to serve as a first step in extending the literature evaluating the immediate impact of a brief, stand-alone bystander psychoeducation program in a middle school setting on increasing student ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, student knowledge of specific strategies that can be used to intervene appropriately, and student confidence in their ability to intervene. Overall, results supported the STAC program as a promising method for equipping bystanders to be advocates in addressing bullying at school. More specifically, after completing the training, students reported a significant increase in their ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, knowledge of the STAC strategies and general confidence intervening in bullying situations. This was true for identification of different types of bullying (i.e., verbal, social/emotional, and cyberbullying), knowledge of the STAC strategies (i.e., stealing the show, turning it over, accompanying others, and coaching compassion), and confidence in intervening

(i.e., confidence in doing something helpful, comfort in being an advocate, and belief in ability to reduce bullying). There was, however, no significant increase for identification of physical bullying, which 98% of students indicated they could identify at baseline.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Contrast Between Pre- and Post-Training*

Item	Pre-Training		Post-Training		<i>t</i> (73)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
<b>Identification of Bullying</b>							
Verbal Bullying	3.44	.55	3.85	.36	6.23	< .001	.75
Social/Emotional Bullying	3.28	.70	3.78	.43	5.42	< .001	.68
Cyberbullying	3.43	.66	3.78	.49	4.77	< .001	.65
Physical Bullying	3.70	.49	3.84	.34	1.92	.06	.23
<b>Knowledge of STAC Strategies</b>							
Stealing the Show	2.97	.67	3.73	.50	8.50	< .001	.96
Accompanying Others	3.33	.58	3.80	.41	6.70	< .001	.84
Turning It Over	3.35	.63	3.66	.52	3.79	< .001	.44
Coaching Compassion	3.01	.69	3.74	.44	8.02	< .001	.96
<b>Confidence Intervening</b>							
Do Something	3.41	.59	3.76	.44	5.58	< .001	.74
Advocate	3.54	.57	3.74	.46	2.75	.008	.38
Make a Positive Difference	3.43	.51	3.64	.49	2.89	.005	.38
<b>Total Scale (11 items)</b>	3.35	.34	3.76	.31	9.77	< .001	.89

Results of this study suggest that a brief 90-minute training is effective in increasing peer advocates' ability to identify different types of bullying behavior, knowledge of strategies that can be used to intervene when they observe bullying, and confidence to intervene. According to Polanin et al. (2012), these are the necessary components needed to equip bystanders to intervene when they observe bullying behavior. Thus, although we did not measure whether or not the peer advocates used the STAC strategies, the current findings suggest that the STAC intervention provided the students with the knowledge and confidence needed to intervene in bullying situations.

We also were interested in examining specific areas of growth in knowledge and confidence. Examination of the item effect sizes revealed that of the significant items, three were in the medium range. These items were the STAC strategy "asking for help" and two confidence in intervening items (i.e., advocating to stop bullying and making a positive difference at school). One possible explanation for why students' scores were lower on turning a bullying situation over to an adult may be related to the importance students place on peer relationships during middle school (Pellegrini & Long, 2002).

Students might be hesitant to turn away from their peer group and ask an adult for help instead. Regarding the smaller effect sizes for two of the confidence items, it is possible that confidence in one's skills as an advocate may be more difficult to change than knowledge. Because skill acquisition for children is largely related to practice (Diamond & Lee, 2011), greater changes in confidence are likely to be reported after students have an opportunity to use the STAC strategies over time.

Results of this study provide preliminary support for the use of STAC as a brief, stand-alone bystander psychoeducational program. This is consistent with prior research on brief, stand-alone programs designed to change bystander behavior and reduce participation in bullying (Evers et al., 2007) and change attitudes and increase efficacy and rate of intervening (Andreou et al., 2008). Taken together, these findings are important because although comprehensive, school-wide programs are considered the standard for practice (Bradshaw, 2015), they place high demands on schools in terms of time allocation and resources. In contrast, brief, stand-alone bystander interventions can provide easy to implement, cost-effective alternatives to school-wide programs.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this study contributes to our understanding of how to equip student bystanders to be advocates to stop bullying at school, certain limitations should be considered. First, students were from predominantly Caucasian Northwest schools, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, further limiting the generalizability of our findings. Thus, it is important for future research to be conducted with a larger and more diverse sample. Further, information was obtained through self-report. Self-report can potentially lead to biased or distorted reporting, including social desirability, resulting in students rating items higher after the training, particularly due to the recent exposure of the training. Self-report, however, is a common practice in counseling research and provides useful information in learning more about programs designed to address bullying in schools.

Additionally, participants were not randomly selected; instead, school counselors invited students to participate based on student attributes that were deemed appropriate for becoming peer advocates. Further, Hispanic students were underrepresented. Thus, selection procedures and the resulting sample also limit the generalizability of the study results. Another limitation is that the study design did not include a control group. Thus, it is not clear if study outcomes were related to selection variable, the STAC training or unmeasured variables. Future research using random assignment and a randomized controlled design in which students are randomly assigned to a STAC training group or a wait-list control group would improve the validity of the study.

Finally, the questionnaire used in this study was designed to measure outcomes specifically for STAC training. We used procedures to establish content validity for the questionnaire. Content validity, however, is not as strong as establishing criterion-related or construct validity, which was beyond the scope of this study. Future studies using questionnaires with established psychometric properties would strengthen the research examining the effectiveness of the STAC training.

Although the current study represents an important first step in evaluating the effectiveness of a brief, stand-alone training, this study was limited to examining changes in ability to identify what bullying looks like, knowledge of the STAC strategies and confidence intervening when bullying is observed. We did not examine (1) student retention of the STAC training information by administering a second post-test to students later in the semester (2) whether students used the STAC strategies learned during the training, (3) social and emotional outcomes for students trained

in the STAC strategies, or (4) if providing the STAC training impacts the prevalence of bullying. Thus, directions for future research include examining outcomes such as implementation of STAC strategies post-training, the social/emotional impact of using STAC strategies on the peer advocates, and the efficacy of the STAC training in reducing bullying behaviors at school.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

This study has practical implications for school counselors. The findings provide preliminary evidence for a brief, stand-alone bystander psychoeducation program in increasing bystanders' knowledge of bullying and confidence intervening when they observe bullying at school. In addition to equipping bystanders to intervene, unlike comprehensive, school-wide programs, the STAC training can be brief and cost effective, allowing schools to have access to program implementation on a broader scale. The implementation of a stand-alone bystander program also can establish school counselors as leaders in addressing bullying in their schools since school counselors do not have to rely on teachers to instruct students through the context of their classroom setting.

School counselors can work collaboratively with a counselor education program at a local university to implement the STAC training and strategies as a brief, stand-alone bystander intervention program. This can be helpful to school counselors because they can be leaders and liaisons in implementation, without having the task of developing another program to be implemented at school. Furthermore, after implementing the STAC training and strategies, school counselors can follow up with small group activities for the middle school students who were trained as peer advocates. The small groups can serve several purposes: (a) to check in with peer advocates assessing whether they utilized the strategies and found them helpful, (b) to support peer advocates in implementing the strategies by practicing role-plays based on situations encountered, teaching advocates to link two or more strategies together, and discussing how peer advocates can work as a team in relevant situations, and (c) to learn more about bullying at school through a student perspective to guide future interventions. This is consistent with the ASCA National Model that emphasizes group activities specific to student needs and interests and supports a comprehensive school counseling program that impacts all students (ASCA, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a brief, stand-alone bystander bullying psychoeducation program for middle school students. Results indicated the STAC training was effective in increasing students' ability to identify what different types of bullying look like, knowledge of the STAC strategies, and general confidence intervening as a peer-advocate. Findings provide preliminary support for the use of STAC as a brief, stand-alone bystander program, thereby providing school counselors with a low-demand approach that equips students to intervene as bystanders. This study is a first step in assessing the effectiveness of the STAC program, providing a foundation for future research examining the impact of STAC training on reducing bullying behaviors in the school setting.

#### ***Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure***

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