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Abstract

This study evaluated the relationship among use defending behaviors, gender, and self-esteem among students trained in a brief, bystander bullying intervention (N = 93). Students were taught four specific strategies to use to defend targets of bullying. We used hierarchical regression analyses to test a moderator model in which we hypothesized females would report using defending behaviors more frequently than males post-training and that baseline self-esteem would moderate this relationship. Findings partially supported our hypotheses. Specifically, for “Turning it Over” (i.e., reporting bullying to an adult) and “Coaching Compassion” (i.e., gently confronting the perpetrator to communicate their behavior is not acceptable), the gender x self-esteem interaction was significant, suggesting that females with high self-esteem were most likely to use these defending behaviors post-training. In contrast, for “Stealing the Show” (i.e., using their sense of humor to distract the peer audience’s attention away from the target), high self-esteem was positively associated with frequency of using this defending behavior for both males and females. For “Accompanying Others” (i.e., reaching out to the target to offer support), females used this strategy more frequently than males, and self-esteem was not a significant moderator. Findings highlight the importance of gender and self-esteem as significant factors that influence whether or not bystanders defend targets of bullying post-training. Implications for bystander training in school-based bullying prevention programs are discussed.

Keywords: STAC, bullying, bystander program, defending behavior, elementary school

School bullying is a significant problem for youth in the United States, with one in four students reporting being a target of bullying (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Although bullying peaks in the sixth grade, with 28.1% of students reporting bullying in the past year, 22% of students in elementary school report being bullied at school and 50% report being fearful of becoming a target of bullying (Luxenberg et al., 2015). Research indicates bullying victimization is largely stable between elementary and middle school and targets of bullying report significantly more negative outcomes than students who are not targets of bullying (Paul & Cillessen, 2003). Among elementary school students, bullying victimization is associated with somatic symptoms (Kim et al., 2015), sleep problems (van Geel et al., 2016), depressive symptoms (Dumas & Midgett, 2021; Kim et al., 2015), anxiety (Kim et al., 2015), social anxiety (Dumas & Midgett, 2021, Pabian & Vanderbosch, 2016), and problems with attention and cognition (Kim

et al., 2015). Witnessing bullying is also associated with depressive symptoms and social anxiety among elementary school students (Doumas & Midgett, 2021). Thus, providing bullying prevention programs to elementary school students before bullying reaches its peak could serve as a promising prevention approach.

The Role of Bystanders

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1970), individuals model behaviors of peers who they (a) perceive as influential, (b) see are rewarded rather than punished for their behavior, and (c) perceive to be similar to themselves in terms of personal characteristics. Students who bully others are often perceived as powerful and possessing high status (Salmivalli et al., 1996). When students witness bullying, they can respond by helping the bully (i.e., joining in or providing positive feedback to the perpetrator), being passive (i.e., walking away from the situation or observing from a distance), or actively intervening on behalf of targets as “defenders” (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Because bullying occurs within the context of a peer-audience (Espelage et al., 2011), when bystanders intentionally or unintentionally act as “reinforcers” or “assistants,” they reinforce the perpetrator (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Additionally, bystanders can become desensitized to aggressive behaviors through repeated exposure, leading to a reduction in empathy (Pabian et al., 2016), which is related to lower levels of “defending” behaviors (Fredrick et al., 2020). A single student of high status, or a group of students acting as “defenders,” can shift attention and power away from the perpetrator and in favor of the target (Salmivalli et al., 2011). As a result, when bystanders intervene on behalf of targets, they can discontinue reinforcement of perpetrators, model pro-social behavior, increase empathy, and provide social support for targets.

Researchers, however, have documented that the majority of student bystanders do not intervene, with only 20% to 30% acting as “defenders” (Quirk & Campbell, 2015; Salmivalli et al., 2005; Song & Oh, 2017). One reason bystanders may not intervene is because they lack the knowledge or skills to defend targets (Forsberg et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2012). Thus, implementing bystander training is an important component of bullying prevention as research indicates when students defend their peers who are targets of bullying, bullying victimization decreases (Padgett & Notar, 2013; Salmivalli, 2014; Salmivalli et al., 2011). Providing bystanders with anti-bullying, peer-advocacy intervention strategies can also serve a positive alternative to reinforcing bullies and further isolating targets.

Gender Differences in Defending Behavior

Among students who witness bullying, female students are more likely to defend targets compared to male students (Lambe et al., 2017; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2016; Salmivalli et al., 1999). One explanation for this gender difference is that female students are more likely to witness bullying behavior (Lambe et al., 2017). Thus, female students may have more opportunities to defend targets relative to male students. Alternatively, researchers have found that defending behavior is associated with depressive symptoms (Lambe et al., 2017; Midgett et al., 2021) and anxiety (Lambe et al., 2017) among male students, but not among female students. Thus, male students may be more reluctant to intervene due to the distress associated with defending behavior. It is not clear, however, if gender differences persist when students are trained to effectively intervene in bullying situations.

Defending Behavior and Bystander Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as a person’s global evaluation of the self, with high self-esteem manifested in one’s overall self-acceptance, feelings of worthiness, and self-confidence (Salmivalli et al., 1999). Researchers have suggested that because self-esteem is associated with confidence in social situations, bystander self-esteem may be associated with an increased willingness to defend targets of bullying (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2018). Researchers have identified a relationship between defending behavior and bystander self-esteem, with results indicating that self-esteem is positively associated with defending behavior (Evans et al., 2018; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Yang & Kim, 2017). To our knowledge, however, only one study investigated the combined role of gender and self-esteem, indicating high self-esteem was associated with defending targets, with no gender differences (Salmivalli et al., 1999).

Role of the School Psychologist in Bullying Prevention

Bullying is associated with socio-emotional and physical risks that impact academic performance (Kub & Feldman, 2015). School psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and develop in an environment that is free from discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2019). According to the NASP Position Statement on Bullying Prevention and

Intervention Among School Age Youth (2019), school psychologists are uniquely positioned to use their knowledge and consultation and advocacy skills to affect school policies and the adoption of best practices in bullying prevention and intervention. Further, school psychologists are encouraged to take a leadership role in bullying prevention through direct and indirect services provided to students, families, and schools. School psychologists can implement bullying prevention by providing education to school staff, parents, and students through trainings and resource materials (Diamanduros et al., 2008).

School-Based Bystander Intervention

Research indicates comprehensive, school-based interventions are effective in reducing bullying and improving socio-emotional outcomes for elementary school students (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Further, research suggests that comprehensive programs that include bystander training are effective (Gaffney et al., 2021). For example, the anti-bullying program KiVa is a multi-component program that includes bystander training in which students are taught to discourage bullying and stand up for targets of bullying (Salmivalli, 1999). Research indicates that KiVa effectively reduces bullying among elementary school students (Kärnä et al., 2011). Other universal classroom-based prevention programs focus more broadly on aggression reduction and social skills promotion. For example, the Preventing Relational Aggression in Schools Everyday Program (PRAISE; Leff et al., 2010) follows a social-cognitive retraining model, promoting feeling identification, physiological arousal cues, calming strategies, interpreting intentions of others, and generating and evaluating alternative behaviors, empathy training, and bystander training. Research conducted with elementary school students indicates PRAISE is effective in increasing social problem-solving knowledge, decreasing hostile attributions, and decreasing relationship aggression (Waasdorp et al., 2022). A number of school-based social emotion learning (SEL) programs also include bullying prevention components and are associated with positive intervention effects (Goldberg et al., 2019).

The STAC Intervention

Comprehensive, school-wide programs are effective; however, they require substantial resources that pose significant barriers to implementation as are time- and resource-intensive (Reinke et al., 2011). Further, although training bystanders is an important component of bullying prevention programming, many school-wide comprehensive programs do not include bystander interventions (Gaffney et al., 2021). Brief programs that focus on bystander training and reduce implementation barriers are needed to provide alternatives for schools that do not have the resources to adopt comprehensive programs. STAC, which stands for four bystander interventions: “Stealing the Show,” “Turning it Over,” “Accompanying Others,” and “Coaching Compassion,” is a brief bystander intervention that teaches students what to do when they witness bullying (Midgett et al., 2015). The STAC intervention is based on the principals of social learning theory (Bandura, 1970). Students are provided education and skills training designed to increase knowledge of bullying, confidence to intervene in bullying situations, and provide specific skills students can use to intervene that are designed to shift attention and power away from the bully, reduce reinforcement, support the target of bullying, and model prosocial behavior. STAC was developed not only to reduce bullying behavior, but also to reduce mental health risks associated with witnessing bullying as a bystander.

Research indicates that the STAC intervention is effective in reducing both bullying victimization (Midgett et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2020) and bullying perpetration (Midgett & Dumas, 2020; Midgett et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2017a; Moran et al., 2020). Researchers have also demonstrated that elementary school students trained in the STAC intervention report increases in knowledge and confidence to intervene (Midgett et al., 2017a, Midgett et al., 2018), as well as increases in self-esteem (Midgett et al., 2017a). Additionally, among students who report witnessing bullying, 90% or more report using at least one STAC strategy post-training (Midgett & Dumas, 2020; Midgett et al., 2017b; Midgett et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2020), with effects documented at follow-up intervals up to four months post-training. For specific STAC strategies, research indicates differential strategy use, with “Turning it Over” and “Accompanying Others” used more frequently relative to “Stealing the Show” and “Coaching Compassion” (Midgett et al., 2017b, Midgett et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2020). Although there is a clear preference among elementary school students for specific strategies, we could find no research examining individual factors (e.g., gender or self-esteem) that might impact strategy use.

The Present Study

Researchers have found that female students are more likely to defend targets than male students (Salmivalli et al., 1999) and self-esteem is positively related to defending behavior (Evans et al., 2018; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Yang & Kim, 2017). Findings from intervention studies also suggest that elementary students trained in a brief bystander intervention, STAC, report post-training increases in confidence to intervene (Midgett et al., 2017a, Midgett et al., 2018) and self-esteem (Midgett et al., 2017a). Further, the majority of elementary school students report using at least one STAC strategy when they witness bullying, although some strategies are used more frequently than others (Midgett et al., 2018). However, we could find no research examining individual factors (e.g., gender and self-esteem) that may be related to STAC strategy use. As such, the purpose of the current study is to extend the literature by examining the relationship between gender and the use of each of the four STAC strategies and self-esteem as a moderator of this relationship. To achieve this aim, we used a single-group longitudinal design examining gender, baseline self-esteem, and the gender x self-esteem interaction as predictors of use of STAC strategies at a 4-month follow-up. Our primary hypotheses were: 1) females will report using the STAC strategies more frequently than males and 2) the relationship between gender and STAC strategy use will be moderated by self-esteem, such that female students with high self-esteem will report the highest frequency of defending behavior.

Methods

Research Design

We utilized a single-group longitudinal design to examine the relationship between gender and the use of STAC strategies post-training and the moderating effect of baseline self-esteem. The University Institutional Review Board and the School District approved all research procedures.

Participants

The authors recruited elementary school students from an urban, public Northwestern school with a total enrollment of 323 students in grades K-6. All students in grades 3-6 were invited to participate in the study ($n = 144$). Of these students, 113 (78%) parents/guardians provided consent. All 113 students (100%) were present for the baseline assessment and the STAC training and assented to participate. A total of 93 students (82.3%) completed the follow-up. There were no differences on demographic or outcome variables between students who completed the follow-up assessment and those who did not. Participants (60.2% female; 39.8% male) ranged in age from 8-12 years old ($M = 9.79$ and $SD = 1.28$), with reported race/ethnicity of 65.2% White, 10.1% Hispanic, 9.0% African-American, 6.7% Asian, and 9.0% other.

Procedure

Members of the research team worked closely with the school counselor to conduct the study procedures. In the fall semester, during regularly scheduled classroom lessons, the school counselor explained that all students in grades 3-6 would be trained in a bystander bullying intervention to learn strategies they can use to help reduce bullying. The school counselor also indicated researchers would be evaluating the training, introduced the study procedures to students, invited them to participate, and gave them an informed consent form to take home to their parents/guardians. A research assistant collected assent from students with signed parental consent forms. Students who provided assent completed the brief survey in their classrooms during school counseling lessons. Students completed follow-up questionnaires four months after the baseline assessment. Members of the research team read each item from every questionnaire to all students. Students who did not have a signed parental consent form sat quietly with an alternative activity during the data collection process.

Measures

Demographic Survey. Students completed a brief demographic questionnaire that included questions about grade, age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Use of STAC Strategies. We measured the frequency of use of STAC strategies with the Use of STAC Strategies Questionnaire (Midgett et al., 2017b). Each STAC strategy was measured using a single item. Students were asked “How often would you say that you used these strategies to stop bullying in the past month? a) “Stealing the Show”

– using humor or distraction to get the attention away from the bullying situation, b) “Turning it Over” – telling an adult about what you saw, c) “Accompanying Others” – reaching out to the student who was the target of bullying, and d) “Coaching Compassion” – helping the student who bullied develop empathy for the target. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*).

Self-Esteem. We measured self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of 10 items. All items were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). We coded items so that higher scores reflect higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES has high levels of internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$) and strong test-retest reliability over a period over a two-week period ($r = .85 - .88$), as well as demonstrated concurrent, predictive and construct validity (Rosenberg, 1979). Internal consistency for the current sample was high ($\alpha = .85$).

Control Variables. We measured witnessing bullying, bullying victimization, and bullying perpetration using the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). Witnessing school bullying was assessed using the global item: “How often have you seen another student being bullied at school in the past month?” Bullying victimization was assessed using the global item: “How often have you been bullied at school in the past month?” Bullying perpetration was measured using the global item: “How often have you taken part in bullying another student at school in the past month?” The items are rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 4 (*Several times a week*). The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire has moderate to high internal reliability ranging from $\alpha = .74 - .98$ and satisfactory construct validity (Kyriakides et al., 2006). Among students who completed the follow-up assessment, 60.2% reported witnessing bullying, 65.9% reported being a target of bullying, and 23.9% reported taking part in bullying another student in the past month. A series of chi square analyses revealed no gender differences in frequency of witnessing bullying, bullying victimization, or bullying perpetration.

The STAC Intervention

The STAC intervention is designed to train students to act as “defenders” on behalf of victims of bullying (Midgett et al., 2015). The school counselor delivered the training during four, 30-minute classroom lessons and conducted two, 5-minute follow-up boosters during guidance lessons following the training. We describe the content of each lesson below.

Lesson 1. The school counselor utilized an audiovisual presentation to teach students (a) the definition of bullying, including examples of what bullying is and what behaviors are not bullying (b) characteristics of students who bully, including the likelihood they have been bullied themselves, to foster empathy and separate the behavior from the student (c) negative associated consequences of bullying for students who are victims, perpetrate bullying, and witness bullying as bystanders, (d) bystander roles and the importance of acting as a “defender.”

Lesson 2. The school counselor reviewed material from Lesson 1 and facilitated a discussion about the different types of bullying students may witness (i.e., physical, verbal, relationship, and cyberbullying), including definitions and examples of each of the types of bullying. Next, students participated in a small group activity during which they created a poster writing or drawing about different types of bullying.

Lesson 3. The school counselor reviewed material previously covered followed by a “basketball activity” during which students wrote about a bullying incident they experienced or witnessed, crumpled the paper up into a ball, and tossed it into a basket. The school counselor read a few of the examples students provided and facilitated a brief discussion to help unite the class and motivate students to act as “defenders.” Next, the school counselor used an audiovisual presentation to introduce students to the following four STAC strategies:

“Stealing the Show.” This strategy involves teaching “defenders” to distract the peer audience’s attention away from the target by using humor or distraction when they observe verbal or relationship bullying. The trainer provides examples such as the “defender” could tell a funny joke, pretend to trip by acting silly, or interrupt the situation by talking about a sporting event. “Stealing the Show” is intended to interrupt the bullying event, shift attention off of the target, and reduce reinforcement of the student who is bullying.

“Turning it Over.” This strategy consists of encouraging “defenders” to tell a safe adult at school when they witness bullying. Students are taught to always use this strategy when they observe physical bullying and cyberbullying or when they are unsure as to how to intervene. “Turning it Over” is intended to interrupt the bullying event, reduce reinforcement, shift power away from the student who is bullying, and model prosocial behavior.

“Accompanying Others.” For this strategy, the trainer teaches “defenders” to reach out to the target of bullying after the incident to offer support. Students are taught they can use accompanying others either by letting targets know they witnessed the incident and communicating that what happened is not acceptable or they can support targets indirectly by spending time with them to communicate that they are not alone. “Accompanying Others” is intended to provide support to the target and model prosocial behavior.

“Coaching Compassion.” This strategy involves gently confronting students who bully others either during or after the incident to tell them to stop and communicate that their behavior is not acceptable. Student “defenders” are taught to use “coaching compassion” only when they have an established friendship with the student who bullied or if the student who bullied is in a younger grade and the “defender” believes the student who bullied will respect them. “Coaching Compassion” is intended to interrupt the bullying situation, reduce reinforcement, shift power away from the student who is bullying, and increase empathy.

Lesson 4. After presenting a review of the four STAC strategies, the school counselor separated students into small groups and provided each group with a pre-written role-play for students to practice using the STAC strategies and then perform a skit where they act as “defenders.” After concluding the role-plays, the school counselor encouraged students to implement the strategies when they witness bullying at school and to ask her for help if they had any questions or concerns.

Booster Sessions. The school counselor conducted two, 5-minute booster sessions at the end of two bi-weekly guidance lessons following the training. The school counselor asked students what types of bullying incidents they observed and facilitated brainstorming of effective ways to use the STAC strategies. The school counselor also encouraged students to share honest feedback about their experience acting as “defenders” and reminded them she was available to meet individually with students if they had any concerns.

Intervention Fidelity. The school counselor completed a training video and research team members observed the school counselor delivering each of the four STAC lessons one time to ensure program fidelity. Team members rated fidelity on a dichotomous scale, *Yes* or *No*, to evaluate accuracy of presenting the content of the training materials, deviation from training materials, and completion of all role-plays.

Power Analysis

We conducted a priori power analysis using the G*Power 3.1.3 program (Faul et al., 2007) for a linear multiple regression. Results of the power analysis indicated a sample size of 77 is needed for power of ≥ 0.80 to detect a medium effect size for R^2 increases for our model with an alpha level of .05. Thus, our sample size of 93 provides adequate power for our analyses.

Statistical Methods

We conducted all analyses using SPSS version 28. We examined the outcome and predictor variables for outliers and adjusted outliers to 3.3 SD above the mean before conducting analyses (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Our aims were to test the relationship between gender and use of the STAC strategies post-training and whether the relationship between gender and post-training strategy use is moderated by baseline self-esteem. To test these aims, we conducted four hierarchical regression analyses, with interaction effects used to test for moderation. We mean centered all predictor variables to reduce problems of multicollinearity introduced into equations containing interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). We created the interaction term by computing the product of gender and self-esteem. We entered frequency of witnessing bullying, bullying victimization, and bullying perpetration in the past month as control variables on Step 1. We entered gender on Step 2 and baseline self-esteem and the gender x self-esteem interaction on Step 3. We used simple slopes to examine the direction and degree of significant interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). For post-hoc comparisons, we controlled for Type 1 error by using a Bonferroni correction, resulting in statistical significance of $p < .03$. We calculated effect size using R^2 with .01 considered small, .09 considered medium, and .25 considered large (Cohen, 1969).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

We present means and standard deviations for outcome and predictor variables by gender in Table 1. Skew and kurtosis were satisfactory and did not substantially deviate from the normal distribution for all variables. Prior to conducting the regression analyses, we also examined grade level and race/ethnicity differences in the four STAC strategies and self-esteem to determine the need for additional control variables. Results of a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed no differences in any of the four STAC strategies or self-esteem by grade level or race/ethnicity. Additionally, we examined bivariate correlations for control, predictor, and outcome variables (see Table 2). The variance inflation factor (VIF) ranged between 1.00 – 1.06, with corresponding tolerance levels ranging from .95 – 1.00. The VIF is well below the rule of thumb of $VIF < 10$ (Norman & Streiner, 2008), suggesting acceptable levels of multicollinearity among the predictor variables.

Regression Analyses

Results from the regression analyses for each STAC strategy are described below. Table 3 presents regression model results.

“Stealing the Show”

The full regression equation was statistically significant for “Stealing the Show,” $F(6, 86) = 7.10, p < .001$. As seen on Step 2, gender was not a statistically significant predictor ($p = .07$). As seen on Step 3, self-esteem was a statistically significant predictor ($p = .01$). The gender x self-esteem interaction, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .30$), suggesting self-esteem did not moderate the relationship between gender and “Stealing the Show.” Self-esteem was positively associated with using “Stealing the Show” for both males and females.

“Turning it Over”

The full regression equation was statistically significant for “Turning it Over,” $F(6, 86) = 17.38, p < .001$. As seen on Step 2, gender was a significant predictor ($p = .05$). As seen on Step 3, although self-esteem was not a significant predictor ($p = .15$), the gender x self-esteem interaction was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Post-hoc comparisons and examination of the slopes in Figure 1 indicate that among females, those with high self-esteem reported significantly higher rates of using “Turning it Over” than those with lower levels of self-esteem ($p < .001$). In contrast, the relationship between self-esteem and “Turning it Over” was not significant for males ($p = .12$). “Turning it Over” was most frequently used by females with high self-esteem.

“Accompanying Others”

The full regression equation was statistically significant for “Accompanying Others,” $F(6, 86) = 14.97, p < .001$. As seen on Step 2, gender was a statistically significant predictor ($p = .002$). As seen on Step 3, self-esteem was not a statistically significant predictor ($p = .14$). Further, the gender x self-esteem interaction was not statistically significant ($p = .24$), suggesting self-esteem did not moderate the relationship between gender and “Accompanying Others.” Being female was significantly associated with higher rates of using “Accompanying Others.”

“Coaching Compassion”

The full regression equation was statistically significant for “Coaching Compassion,” $F(6, 86) = 7.97, p < .001$. As seen on Step 2, gender was a statistically significant predictor ($p = .002$). As seen on Step 3, self-esteem was not a statistically significant predictor ($p = .06$), but the gender x self-esteem interaction was statistically significant ($p < .03$). Post-hoc comparisons and examination of the slopes in Figure 2 indicate that among females, those with high self-esteem reported significantly higher rates of using “Coaching Compassion” than those with lower levels of self-esteem ($p = .004$). In contrast, the relationship between self-esteem and “Coaching Compassion” was not significant for males ($p = .43$). “Coaching Compassion” was most frequently used by females with high self-esteem.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine gender differences in the use of STAC strategies and the moderating effect of self-esteem. Although previous research indicates defending behavior is related to gender (Lambe et al., 2017; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2016; Salmivalli et al., 1999) and self-esteem (Evans et al., 2018; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Yang & Kim, 2017), to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine gender differences and the moderating effect of self-esteem as predictors of use of specific defending behaviors (i.e., STAC strategies). We hypothesized that female students would report using the STAC strategies more frequently than male students and that gender differences in use of the STAC strategies would be moderated by self-esteem. Overall, our hypotheses were supported, although different patterns emerged across the STAC strategies.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, with the exception of “Stealing the Show,” females reported using the STAC strategies more frequently than males. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that female bystanders are more likely to use defending behavior when they witness bullying than male students (Lambe et al., 2017; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2016; Salmivalli et al., 1999). Our findings suggest that this continues to be the case even after being trained to use specific skills to defend targets of bullying. One explanation for this gender difference is that female students are more likely to witness bullying behavior (Lambe et al., 2017). We did not, however, find differences between females and males in frequency of witnessing bullying in this sample ($p = .76$). Consistent with prior research examining self-esteem and defending behavior (Evans et al., 2018; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Yang & Kim, 2017), we did find that self-esteem was positively associated with the use of all strategies, with the exception of “Accompanying Others.” Although self-esteem may provide some explanatory information for differential use of strategies, we did not find self-esteem differences between females and males in this sample ($p = .49$).

Consistent with our second hypothesis, baseline self-esteem moderated the relationship between gender and strategy use for “Turning it Over” and “Coaching Compassion.” Specifically, females with high self-esteem reported the highest frequency of using these strategies. Using “Turning it Over” and “Coaching Compassion” both require addressing the bullying incident in ways that involve the perpetrator, either by telling an adult who may take action against the perpetrator or talking to the perpetrator directly. Research indicates students may fear the disapproval of peers and loss of social status when defending targets (Forsberg et al., 2018). Further, rejection sensitivity, which is related to lower levels of defending behavior (Gönültaş, et al., 2020), is related to anxiety for males, but not for females (London et al., 2007). Thus, the perception of peer disapproval may be directly related to the finding that females use these strategies more frequently than males, with the highest rates of use among females with high self-esteem. In contrast, “Accompanying Others” was used most frequently by females, regardless of self-esteem level. This strategy involves reaching out to the target of bullying after the incident to offer support. Research indicates that at this age, females have greater levels of empathy (Landazabal, 2009) and perspective taking (Van der Graaff et al., 2014) than males. Thus, this strategy may come naturally to females, relative to males, at this developmental stage. Finally, “Stealing the Show” was associated with higher levels of self-esteem for both females and males. This strategy requires students to shift the attention of the peer group away from the target and onto the bystander, effectively making the bystander the center of attention. Researchers have suggested that self-esteem is positively associated with confidence in social situations (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2018), as well as the use of humor (Leist & Müller, 2013). Findings suggest that self-esteem is important for both males and females in choosing to use this strategy.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study adds to our understanding of factors that contribute to defending behavior, certain limitations should be considered. Results are limited to one school and the sample was comprised primarily of female students (60.2%), limiting the generalizability of the results. Thus, there is a need for additional studies evaluating gender differences in use of the STAC strategies in more than one school and with samples that have a more even distribution of females and males. Additionally, information was obtained through self-report questionnaires, potentially leading to biased or distorted reporting. Research, however, suggests that children are able to provide useful information about their experience when asked Likert-type questions (Christensen & James, 2008). Further, members of the research team read the surveys to all students to enhance data quality. Research specific to bullying provides evidence that third grade students report past-month bullying victimization as reliably or more reliably than fourth and fifth grade students, but may not be as reliable as older student when reporting bullying perpetration (Hartung et al., 2011). Additionally, researchers have found that reports of past-month behavioral health constructs (e.g., self-esteem, social interaction) can be reliably and validity assessed directly from children as young as age six (Riley, 2004). However, observational data or inclusion of teacher reports could be used in future research to strengthen findings.

Next, although we controlled for frequency of witnessing bullying, bullying victimization, and bullying perpetration in the analyses, we did not control for gender of the target. Future research should examine same-gender vs other-gender defending behavior to gain a better understanding of the context of STAC strategy use, as research indicates elementary age students are more likely to defend children of the same gender (Veenstra et al., 2013). Additionally, we included students in the sample who reported that they did not witness bullying in the past month. Further, it is not clear if students reporting that they did not use a specific strategy was due to no opportunity to use the strategy because they did not witness bullying. Thus, we conducted a secondary set of analyses on the subsample of student reporting witnessing bullying ($n = 56$); the results did not change in any substantive way. Future researchers, however, should use a more sensitive measure to identify the context of not using the STAC strategies.

Finally, although we identified significant gender differences in use of STAC strategies, we did not explore why males are less likely to intervene in bullying situations relative to females. Future research should include additional constructs, including fear of negative evaluation, rejection sensitivity, and empathy as potential mediators of the relationship between gender and use of the STAC strategies. Additionally, future research using a qualitative design is warranted to understand the experiences of male students who witness bullying, including what factors may contribute to their reluctance to intervene in bullying situations.

Implications for School Psychologists

This study has important implications for school psychologists who are involved in bullying prevention programs at the elementary school level. Research indicates that bullying starts as early as elementary school and is associated with a wide range of consequences for targets of bullying (Doumas & Midgett, 2021; Kim et al., 2015; Pabian & Vanderbosch, 2016; van Geel et al., 2016) and for students who witness bullying as bystanders (Doumas & Midgett, 2021). Data from this study indicate that approximately two thirds of students reported witnessing bullying in the past month. Thus, it is important for school psychologists to provide leadership in selecting and implementing evidence-based programs to provide students with skills they can use to intervene when they witness bullying situations. The STAC intervention focuses on training bystanders and places a low demand on schools in terms of time and financial resources, reducing barriers for program adoption and increasing sustainability.

The role of the school psychologist is instrumental in school-based bullying prevention. The school psychologist can provide bystander training for students to teach them appropriate ways to intervene when they see bullying behavior. Training should include specific skills and provide students with opportunities to practice those skills, as skill practice reinforces learning (Bennett-Levy et al., 2009). Through training activities and follow-up booster sessions, students can learn information and practice skills so they can effectively defend targets, stopping bullying victimization and reducing negative consequences associated with bullying for both targets and students who witness bullying as bystanders. By reinforcing appropriate bystander behavior and supporting students to intervening when bullying occurs, school psychologists can empower students to support each other to not tolerate bullying.

Further, the finding that STAC strategy use is dependent upon gender and self-esteem provides important information for school psychologists who are training students to use the STAC strategies. It is important for school psychologists to be aware that when student witness physical bullying or cyberbullying they are instructed to use “Turning it Over.” Female students with high self-esteem were more likely to use “Turning it Over” than other students. Thus, it is important to find ways to increase the use of this strategy. School psychologists may need to educate other school personnel, including teachers, on the importance of intervening in bullying situations and supporting bystanders to intervene when they witness bullying. This is particularly important as teacher’s self-reported attitudes (Wang et al., 2015) and student’s perceptions of anti-bullying behavior (Doumas & Midgett, 2019) are related to bullying victimization. Further, among elementary school students, the beliefs that teachers will actively intervene in bullying is related to a greater willingness to report bullying (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014).

School psychologists can also try to match the STAC strategies to student characteristics, taking gender and self-esteem into consideration. For example, results suggest that for females, use of all of the strategies were associated with higher self-esteem, with the exception of “Accompanying Others.” Thus, it may be beneficial to encourage female students with lower self-esteem to use “Accompanying Others.” In contrast, with the exception of “Stealing the Show,” males used all strategies significantly less frequently than females. Similar to females, however, “Stealing the Show” and “Coaching Compassion” were used by males less frequently than “Turning it Over” and “Accompanying Others.” School psychologists implementing STAC need to be aware of dynamics that may make defending behavior challenging for males, including fear of retaliation (Forsberg et al., 2018; Gönültaş, et al., 2020), peer rejection

(Forsberg et al., 2018), and emotional distress (Lambe et al., 2017; Midgett et al., 2021) associated with defending behavior. It may be important to provide information to male students that defending actually increases popularity among peers (van der Ploeg et al., 2017). It should also be noted that prior research indicates students trained in the STAC program report increases self-esteem (Midgett et al., 2017). Thus, encouraging students to use the STAC strategies might increase self-esteem, which in turn might increase the use of the STAC strategies, creating a positive feedback loop. Providing positive feedback and coaching during booster sessions may be particularly useful.

Finally, because school psychologists work directly with students, staff, parents, and administrators, they are well-positioned to take a leadership role in the development of a positive school climate (Swearer et al., 2009). A positive school climate consists of positive relationships among students and school personnel and negative attitudes toward inappropriate behaviors, including bullying (Wang et al., 2013). School psychologists can model antibullying attitudes (e.g., empathy for targets) and behaviors (e.g., appropriate reactions to bullying and reports of bullying), promote knowledge and awareness of bullying through education and training, take reports of any bullying incident seriously, and consistently follow school policy when bullying occurs. School psychologists can also educate school personnel not to ignore, minimize, or normalize bullying behavior. Further, school psychologists can reach out to parents/guardians, providing education and resources about bullying and how to support their children to intervene in bullying situations with appropriate strategies. These day-to-day practices can have a significant impact on school climate and the reduction of bullying behavior as a positive school climate plays a pivotal role in bullying prevention and can optimize the impact of stand-alone bystander programs (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014).

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Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviations for Control Variables, Self-Esteem, and Use of STAC Strategies by Gender

| Variable | Gender | | Total Sample (<i>n</i> = 93) |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Male (<i>n</i> = 37) | Female (<i>n</i> = 56) | |
| Witnessing Bullying | 1.38 (0.49) | 1.41 (0.50) | 1.40 (0.49) |
| Bullying Victimization | 2.35 (1.46) | 2.58 (1.37) | 2.50 (1.40) |
| Bullying Perpetration | 1.30 (0.57) | 1.32 (0.52) | 1.31 (0.53) |
| Self-Esteem | 30.92 (6.37) | 29.86 (6.19) | 30.28 (6.25) |
| Stealing the Show | 1.51 (1.10) | 1.89 (1.44) | 1.74 (1.32) |
| Turning it Over | 1.96 (1.30) | 2.40 (1.65) | 2.22 (1.53) |
| Accompanying Others | 1.80 (1.20) | 2.47 (1.64) | 2.20 (1.51) |
| Coaching Compassion | 1.24 (0.60) | 1.90 (1.41) | 1.64 (1.20) |

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations for Control Variables, Gender, Self-Esteem, and Use of STAC Strategies

| Measure | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---------------------------|--------|-------|------|-------|-----|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Witnessing Bullying | — | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Bullying Victimization | -.42** | — | | | | | | | |
| 3. Bullying Perpetration | -.30** | -.04 | — | | | | | | |
| 4. Gender | .03 | .08 | .02 | — | | | | | |
| 5. Self-Esteem | .12 | .31** | .06 | -.08 | — | | | | |
| 6. Stealing the Show | .46** | .12 | .04 | .14 | .19 | — | | | |
| 7. Turning it Over | .65** | .28** | .21* | .14 | .07 | .43** | — | | |
| 8. Accompanying Others | .65** | .27* | .17 | .22* | .04 | .57** | .71** | — | |
| 9. Coaching Compassion | .44** | .12 | .12 | .27** | .15 | .56** | .62** | .77** | — |

*p < .05, **p < .01.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for the Use of STAC Strategies

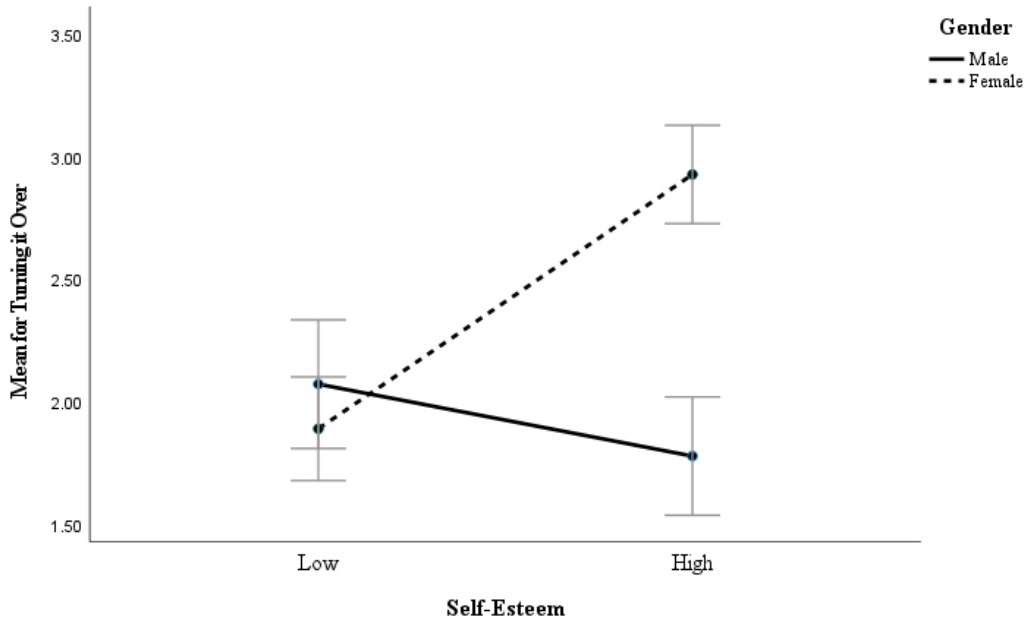
| Variable | ΔR^2 | B | SE B | β | 95% CI |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------|------|---------|----------------|
| Stealing the Show | | | | | |
| Step 1 | .23*** | | | | |
| Witness Bullying | | -1.47 | .29 | -.56 | [-2.04, -.89] |
| Bullying Victimization | | -.10 | .09 | -.11 | [-.28, .08] |
| Bullying Perpetration | | -.32 | .24 | -.13 | [-.78, .15] |
| Step 2 | .03 | | | | |
| Gender | | -0.23 | .12 | -.17 | [-.47, .02] |
| Step 3 | .07** | | | | |
| Self-Esteem | | 0.05 | .02 | .24** | [.01, .09] |
| Gender x Self-Esteem | | -0.02 | .02 | -.09 | [-.06, .02] |
| Adjusted R ² | .29** | | | | |
| Turning it Over | | | | | |
| Step 1 | .43*** | | | | |
| Witness Bullying | | -2.00 | .29 | -.64 | [-2.58, -1.41] |
| Bullying Victimization | | .01 | .09 | .01 | [-.17, .19] |
| Bullying Perpetration | | .06 | .24 | .02 | [-.41, .53] |
| Step 2 | .03* | | | | |
| Gender | | -0.25 | .12 | -.16 | [-.50, -.01] |
| Step 3 | .10*** | | | | |
| Self-Esteem | | 0.03 | .02 | .11 | [-.01, .07] |
| Gender x Self-Esteem | | -0.07 | .02 | -.27*** | [-.10, -.03] |
| Adjusted R ² | .52*** | | | | |

| Accompanying Others | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------|-------|-----|---------------------|
| Step 1 | .43*** | | | |
| Witness Bullying | | -2.04 | .29 | -.67 [-2.62, -1.47] |
| Bullying Victimization | | -.01 | .09 | -.01 [-.20, .17] |
| Bullying Perpetration | | -.07 | .23 | -.03 [-.54, .39] |
| Step 2 | .06** | | | |
| Gender | | -0.38 | .12 | -.25** [-.61, -.14] |
| Step 3 | .03 | | | |
| Self-Esteem | | 0.03 | .02 | .12 [-.01, .07] |
| Gender x Self-Esteem | | -0.02 | .02 | -.09 [-.06, .02] |
| Adjusted R ² | .48*** | | | |
| Coaching Compassion | | | | |
| Step 1 | .20** | | | |
| Witness Bullying | | -1.17 | .27 | -.48 [-1.71, -0.63] |
| Bullying Victimization | | -.07 | .09 | -.09 [-.24, .10] |
| Bullying Perpetration | | -.05 | .22 | -.02 [-.48, .39] |
| Step 2 | .09** | | | |
| Gender | | -0.36 | .11 | -.30** [-.58, -.14] |
| Step 3 | .08** | | | |
| Self-Esteem | | 0.03 | .02 | .18 [.00, .07] |
| Gender x Self-Esteem | | -0.04 | .02 | -.20* [-.07, .00] |
| Adjusted R ² | .32*** | | | |

Note. $N = 93$. SE = standard error. CI = confidence interval.
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

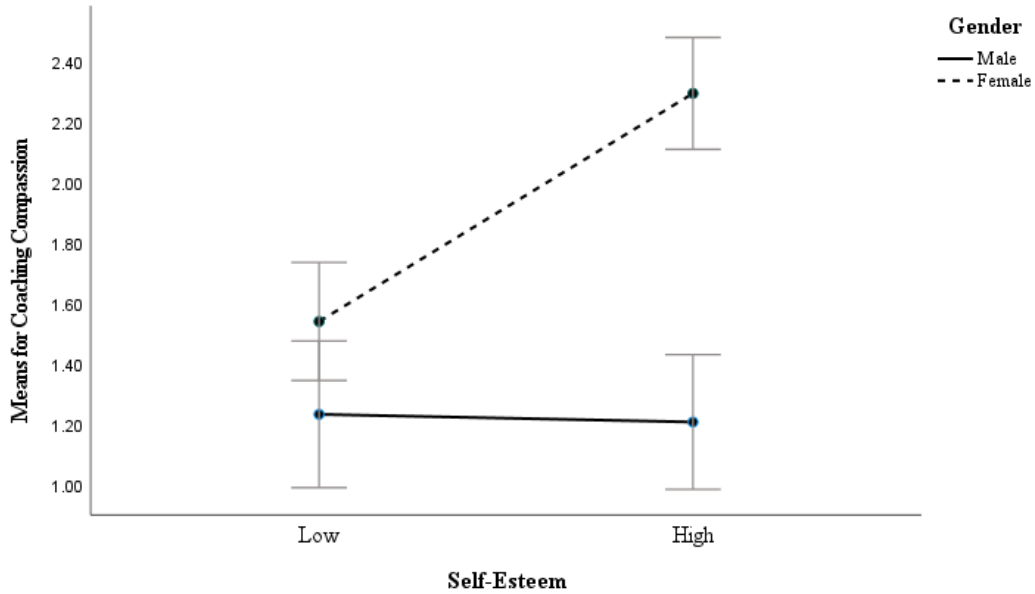
Means for Turning it Over by Gender and Self-Esteem



Note. Simple slopes are shown depicting the direction and degree of the significant interaction testing moderator effects ($p = .001$). Self-esteem was significantly related to use of Turning it Over for females ($p = .001$) but not for males ($p = .12$).

Figure 2

Means for Coaching Compassion by Gender and Self-Esteem



Note. Simple slopes are shown depicting the direction and degree of the significant interaction testing moderator effects ($p = .03$). Self-esteem was significantly related to use of Coaching Compassion for females ($p = .004$) but not for males ($p = .43$).