

University of Groningen

Be a buddy, not a bully?

van der Ploeg, Rozemarijn

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Ploeg, R. (2016). *Be a buddy, not a bully? Four studies on emotional and social processes related to bullying, defending, and victimization*. [Groningen]: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

1

Introduction

There is a long tradition of research bullying in schools. This is not surprising as it is a serious, pervasive problem all over the world. Not only victims face severe, sometimes long-lasting negative consequences of being harassed (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011a). Witnesses of bullying are also likely to experience negative effects, such as anxiety or insecurity and a low well-being at school (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009; Werth, Nickerson, Aloe, & Swearer, 2015). Moreover, for bullies themselves their negative behavior is related to adverse outcomes such as school-dropout, drinking problems and a higher risk at involvement in criminal behavior (Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011b).

Notwithstanding the growing knowledge on bullying and victimization, efforts to reduce bullying in schools seem only modestly successful (see for instance: Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Thus, there is a great need for a better understanding of this complex phenomenon.

In this dissertation I attempt to gain detailed insights into the victims' situation and expand the knowledge on emotional and social processes related to bullying, victimization, and defending. Why do bullies bully? What makes bystanders intervene? With this knowledge, I aim to contribute to the effectiveness of interventions aimed at counteracting bullying and victimization in schools.

School bullying: a complex group phenomenon

Bullying is traditionally defined as *"intentional and harmful behavior which is targeted repeatedly at one and the same individual who finds it difficult to defend him- or herself"* (Olweus, 1993). This definition forms the basis of the revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) which is commonly used in research on school bullying, including the empirical studies in this dissertation. However, recently it has been questioned whether repetition is a crucial characteristic of bullying, given that a single incident, particularly cyberbullying, can also be very harmful to victims. The new theoretical definition describes bullying as *"aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance"* (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). Both definitions emphasize that bullying is characterized by an imbalance in power which can be due to physical (e.g., size), psychological (e.g., self-esteem), or social (e.g., social standing) factors. This inequity is what makes bullying different from other forms of aggression.

Several types of bullying behavior can be distinguished (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011). Physical bullying (hitting, kicking), verbal bullying (calling names, insulting), and material bullying (stealing or damaging things) are considered direct types of bullying, whereas relational bullying, for instance ignoring or gossiping, and cyberbullying via computers or mobile phones can be both direct and indirect.

Bullies are often motivated by a quest for high social standing in the peer group (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). By harassing their peers, bullies want to show their power and strength and increase their dominant position (e.g. Volk, Cioppa, Earle, & Farrell, 2015). The peer group assigns status to its members. As such, bullying should not be seen as an interaction between just the bully and the victim, but rather as a group phenomenon in which children have different roles (participants roles, see Salmivalli, 2010). Apart from bullies and victims, witnesses of bullying can actively help the bully (assistants), encourage the bully by cheering or laughing (reinforcers), support the victim (defenders), or remain uninvolved (passive bystanders). Bullying is thus a problem that arises in the larger peer group. The same peer group is also important in counteracting bullying, given that the extent to which bullying is an effective strategy to obtain high social status depends on the witnesses. A positive change in the behavior of bystanders reduces the social rewards (i.e., becoming popular) gained by bullying and consequently the bullies' motivation to bully (Salmivalli et al., 2012).

Social standing in the classroom

High social standing or status in the classroom and a sense of belonging in the peer group is of great importance in (early) adolescent life (e.g., Cillessen & Rose, 2005) and plays a central role in the group processes concerning bullying and victimization in schools.

Social status can be reflected by receiving affection from peers and one's reputation in the peer group. In order to measure these distinct constructs, two types of social standing are usually distinguished: social preference (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) and perceived popularity (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Social preference is a measure of affection that reflects the degree to which an individual is liked by his or her peers. Peer acceptance is generally related to prosocial behaviors as well as positive developmental and psychological outcomes. In contrast, peer rejection (i.e., being disliked) is often associated with internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005).

Perceived popularity is a reputational measure of social standing. It reflects prestige, visibility, and a dominant position in the peer group. A popular status among peers can be achieved by outstanding behaviors which can be both prosocial and antisocial (e.g., Dijkstra, Lindenberg, Verhulst, Ormel, & Veenstra, 2009; Slaughter, Imuta, Peterson, & Henry, 2015).

The KiVa anti-bullying program

This dissertation is part of a research project on the Dutch implementation of the KiVa program, an anti-bullying intervention predicated on the idea that bullying is a complex group phenomenon in which status plays an important role. KiVa was developed in Finland, evaluated in a randomized controlled trial, and disseminated nationwide afterwards (Kärnä et al., 2013; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alanen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011). The success of KiVa in Finland led to the implementation and evaluation of the KiVa program in the Netherlands (Veenstra et al., 2013).

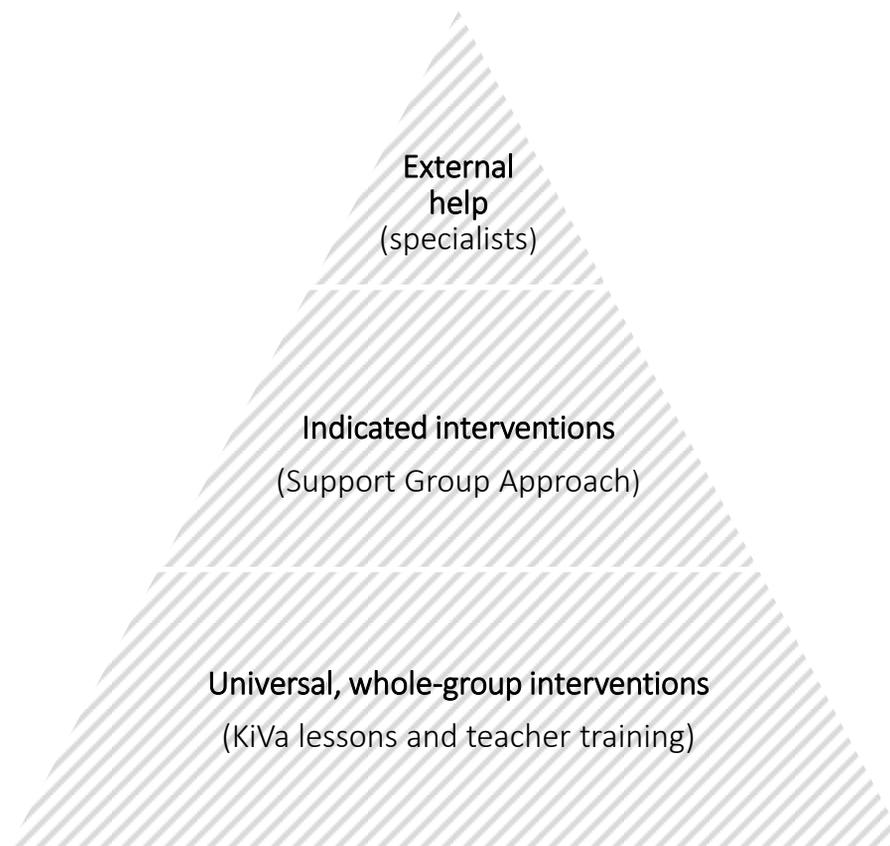
KiVa is an acronym for *Kiusaamista Vastaan*, which can be translated as 'against bullying'. The Finnish word *kiva* also means 'nice'. A main goal of the KiVa program is to raise students' awareness of their contributions to bullying and to teach them that bullying is a problem that concerns the whole group. The program aims to encourage bystanders to take a clear stance against bullying and to support the victim instead of assisting the bully. For that purpose, the intervention contains universal actions that target all students (lowest tier in Figure 1.1). The core of these universal actions is ten lessons for students in grades 3-6 covering a wide variety of themes, such as showing respect, group pressure, bullying, and intervening in bullying. The lessons consist of small group discussions, exercises and role play. In addition, students can test their knowledge about bullying and enhance their defending skills with a computer game (Poskiparta et al., 2012). The universal actions are principally aimed at preventing bullying. For solving persisting bullying cases, the KiVa intervention includes indicated actions (middle tier, Figure 1.1). In Finland, the indicated actions can be both confronting or non-confronting (Garandeau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2014), whereas in the Netherlands only a non-confronting strategy is used (the Support Group Approach, see Chapter 3). The Support Group Approach involves discussion meetings with victims and their bullies (i.e., initiators and assistants), as well with prosocial classmates. Each KiVa school has a KiVa team of at least three teachers or other school personnel. KiVa team

members are trained in addressing persistent cases of bullying, using the Support Group Approach.

Besides the manual with teacher instructions for the universal and indicated actions, the KiVa program provides a guide for parents, online material and instruction for classroom teachers, and gadgets (i.e., posters, bright colored vests for supervision during breaks) that remind both students and school personnel of being in a KiVa school (see Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010; Veenstra et al., 2013 for a more detailed description).

Figure 1.1

Pyramid of interventions



THIS DISSERTATION

The focus of this dissertation is on the consequences of bullying, defending, and victimization in the classroom. The four empirical studies aim to address various gaps in the literature on school bullying. In the first part, I focus on the victims of bullying. I investigate the associations between experiencing victimization and students' psychological and social adjustment (Chapter 2) and the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach in altering the victims' situation (Chapter 3).

The second part is about why students intervene in bullying situations and get involved in bullying itself. Bullying can be considered strategic, goal-directed behavior to achieve high social status in the classroom hierarchy (e.g., Salmivalli, 2010; Volk et al., 2015, 2014). Defending behaviors are also likely to be related to social status (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2010; Meter & Card, 2015; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). I examine the antecedents and status consequences of defending (Chapter 4) and the longitudinal interplay between bullying and perceived popularity in the classroom (Chapter 5).

In the remainder of this introduction, I elaborate on the research topics addressed in this dissertation and discuss how the various studies add to the knowledge on school bullying. Subsequently, I describe the data used in the empirical chapters. The introduction ends with a brief overview.

The victims' situation

In the long tradition of bullying research, strong evidence is found for negative consequences of victimization. Victims of bullying are often frightened to go school, suffer from low self-esteem and are more likely to be anxious or depressed, also later in life (Reijntjes et al., 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). Besides various psychological maladjustments, experiencing victimization is associated with social adjustment problems: victims tend to have few friends and generally have a low social standing in the peer group (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012). Nevertheless, there are differences in the emergence of adjustment problems between victims, which might be due to the extent to which children feel that they deviate from the peer group (Graham & Juvonen, 2001).

In studying when experiencing victimization is associated with more severe maladjustment the focus was mainly on the classroom context (e.g., Huitsing, Veenstra, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2012). Specific aspects of victimization were often neglected. In Chapter 2 I attempt to understand differences in the harmfulness of victimization by assessing various indicators of bullying intensity. I argue that –

besides frequency – it is important to take into consideration in how many ways (i.e., the multiplicity of victimization) and by how many peers (i.e., number of bullies involved) the bullying is performed. Hence, this study contributes to enhancing our knowledge of differences in the victims' situation when several aspects of victimization are taken into account simultaneously. Moreover, the new measures used in this study made it possible to distinguish "less severe" victims from frequent victims and non-victims. Using these detailed measures of victimization, Chapter 2 extends current literature on (negative) correlates of victimization, and provides first insights into how the intensity of victimization can be measured in future studies.

Chapter 3 builds on Chapter 2 by examining whether the Support Group Approach, an indicated intervention aimed to improve the victims' situation is effective. In many countries, schools are strongly encouraged to implement indicated actions for tackling bullying situations that have been resistant to universal, preventive interventions (see Figure 1.1). The Support Group Approach – mostly similar to the No Blame Method (Robinson & Maines 2008; Young 1998) and The Method of Shared Concern (Pikas 1989, 2002) – is widely used in schools all over the world. However, little is known about its effectiveness. The few studies that examine the intervention are short-term evaluations of (perceived) changes in the bullying situation. In Chapter 3 I attempt to gain insight into the effects of the support group intervention over the course of a school year. Hereby the focus is not only on victimization but also on changes in defending and the victims' well-being at school. In addition, the use of exact matching methods (Iacus, King, & Porro, 2011) made it possible to examine the effects of the intervention above and beyond the school-wide KiVa anti-bullying program. This study is among the first to investigate the unique contribution of the Support Group Approach and contributes to the existing literature by offering a better understanding of short-term and long-term changes in the victims' situation caused by the intervention.

Defending victims of bullying

The behavior of bystanders is considered crucial in reducing bullying and victimization in school. Research has shown that victim support not only helps to bring an end to bullying (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), it also alleviates the victims' psychosocial maladjustment (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011). Witnesses of bullying are, however, faced with a dilemma: although most of them perceive bullying as something wrong and show supportive attitudes toward

victimized classmates, they rarely intervene (Salmivalli, 2014). There are several reasons why bystanders do not intervene when their peers are being harassed. It might be that students feel that they are unable to stop the bullying or they are afraid to lose their social standing in the peer group and risk getting victimized themselves (Juvonen & Galván, 2008; Pöyhönen et al., 2010).

Only recently scholars started to investigate factors that explain students' defending behavior, mostly using a cross-sectional design. However, to be able to encourage bystanders to stand up for their victimized classmates, it is important to know what makes students intervene in bullying situations and how this defending behavior is rewarded by peers. Therefore, in Chapter 4 I attempt to obtain more insight into both the antecedents *and* consequences of defending. The use of a longitudinal design is a substantial contribution to previous studies that investigated defending behavior. Another contribution to the existing body of knowledge is that I distinguished victims of bullying from non-victims. This way obtains a nuanced picture of the benefits and risks of intervening in bullying situations.

The complex interplay between bullying and status

Bullying appears to be an effective strategy to obtain high social status in the peer group as previous studies established that it is associated with perceived popularity over time (e.g., Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Reijntjes, Vermande, Olthof, et al., 2013; Sentse, Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015). Some anti-bullying interventions, including KiVa, assume that bullies will be less motivated to bully when the social rewards gained by their antisocial behavior decline, that is when bullies are no longer perceived as popular. Yet, a recent study found that especially very popular students persist in bullying their classmates (Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014).

Relatively little is known about the interplay between bullying and perceived popularity over time. Is bullying a way to gain or maintain popular status? In Chapter 5 I aim to unravel the relational patterns of bullying and perceived popularity through a longitudinal social network approach. This way enables accounting for the fact that both bullying and popularity take place in dyadic relations and depend strongly on the group context (Huitsing, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014; Steglich, Snijders, & Pearson, 2010).

I especially sought to expand the knowledge on relational processes that would explain more precisely how bullying and popularity interact. I focused on the creation and maintenance of popular status among bullies on the one hand, and the formation and termination of bullying relations among popular students on the

other hand. This study contributes to a better understanding of mechanisms that may underlie the existence of bullying in the classroom context. These insights can be useful to address bullying behaviors of highly popular students in the classroom.

THE DUTCH KIVA STUDY

The data used – with the exception of Chapter 4 – come from the Dutch KiVa project, a five-wave longitudinal study on the effectiveness of the KiVa anti-bullying intervention in the Netherlands. I was involved in implementing KiVa at Dutch primary schools and the data collection.

Implementation and data collection

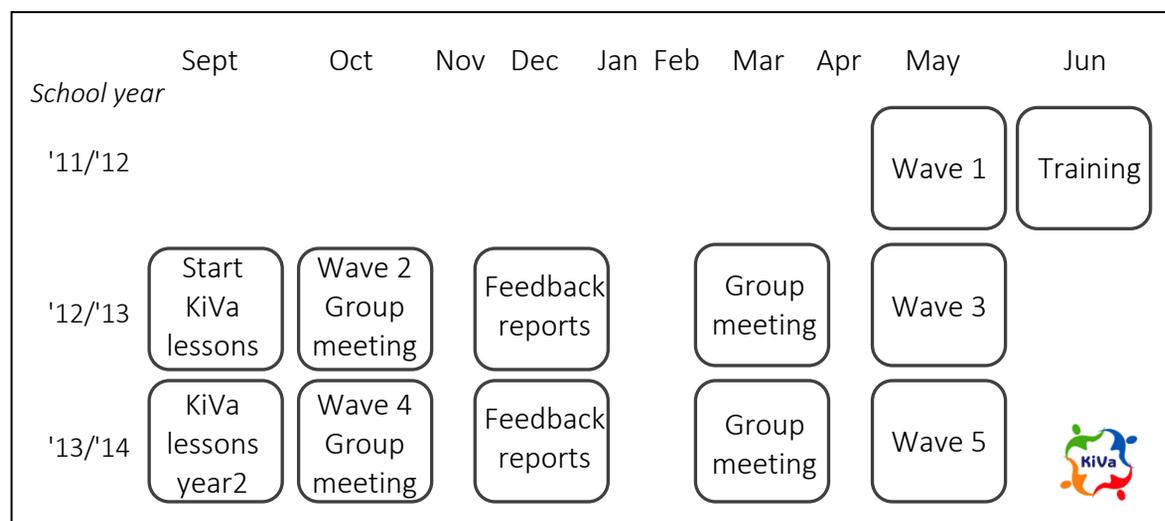
Implementation of KiVa in the Netherlands began in 2011. All teaching materials were translated into Dutch and adapted for the Dutch educational context. In addition, a new intervention condition was developed, the KiVa+ condition. In this condition teachers receive reports with feedback on the social structure of their classroom (e.g., who bullies whom?) and the well-being of their students. The report gives teachers insights into the group processes in their classroom. The aim of these reports was to help classroom teachers recognize bullying and victimization, and intervene more effectively (Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012).

In the fall of 2011, letters with information about the goals and content of the intervention and the enrollment procedure for the evaluation study were sent to all Dutch primary schools. A total of 132 schools indicated they were willing to take part in the KiVa project. The evaluation started in May 2012 with pre-assessment of about 10.000 students in grades 2-5 (ages 7-11; Dutch grades 4-7). Some schools did not participate due to lack of commitment in the school-team, or lack of time or resources to take part in the data collection. 100 schools completed the pre-assessment. Afterwards, schools were randomly assigned by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) to either the control condition (33 schools) or one of the two intervention conditions (i.e., 34 KiVa schools and 33 KiVa+ schools). One KiVa+ school dropped out because they did not want to participate anymore.

The KiVa and KiVa+ schools underwent a two-day training course developed by the KiVa Consortium.¹ Each group of about 25 participants was trained by a practitioner (school counselor) and a member from the KiVa research group. The KiVa intervention started in August 2012, at the beginning of the curriculum. Control schools were asked to continue their “care as usual” anti-bullying approach. Intervention schools shared their experiences in group meetings twice a year, under the supervision of a practitioner and a researcher. The experiences of the KiVa teachers were used as input for further development of the program. Data collection took place in October and May of each school year. For a graphic overview of the KiVa timeline see Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2

Timeline KiVa study



Questionnaire

An online tool facilitated the data collection, a questionnaire largely based on the one that was used in Finland. It consists of both self-reports and peer nominations on bullying and victimization, students’ behaviors, and their well-being. An important benefit is that peer nominations concerning bullying, defending, and victimization were direct questions. That is, instead of asking students to nominate bullies in general, children were specifically asked to name who was bullying them. These dyadic nominations allowed us to obtain a precise insight into the social structure of the classroom and the students’ position within the peer group. A main

¹ The KiVa consortium is comprised of scholars from the KiVa research group, school-counselors, and implementers. In monthly meetings they congregate about the implementation, evaluation, and development of the intervention.

difference of our (Dutch) questionnaire compared to the Finnish one is that it used more peer nominations. This meant we could distinguish between the initiators of bullying (“Who in your class starts bullying you?”) and their assistants (“Who in your class joins the bully or is there when the bullying takes place?”). We could also identify friendship networks in the classroom by asking the students to nominate their best friends. Another essential difference is that we included cross-classroom nominations. Students thus were able to nominate non-classmates for the main network questions (i.e., bullying, defending, rejection, friendships).

The online questionnaires were filled out in the schools’ computer labs during regular school hours. The process was administered by teachers, who were also present to answer questions. Short movies were used to clarify the procedure and explain the definition of bullying to the students. The latter gave several examples covering various types of bullying, and an explanation emphasizing that bullying is intentional and repetitive behavior characterized by an imbalance of power. Students did not participate if parents did not give consent or if they did not want to fill in the questionnaire. In all waves the participation rate was high, about 98%.

OVERVIEW

This dissertation sheds light on the consequences of being victimized, as well as victim support, and involvement in bullying. The outline of the empirical studies gives an overview of the topics addressed in this dissertation (see Table 1.1). The empirical chapters (2-5) were written for publication in peer-reviewed journals and may be read as standalone research articles. For this reason, some overlap between the chapters is inevitable. Likewise, small differences in terminology may occur. The main findings of the four studies are discussed in Chapter 6, including scientific and practical implications. In this final chapter I reflect on further steps that may be taken in future research on school bullying.

Table 1.1*Overview of the empirical studies*

	Research aims	Data	Sample	Analytical strategy
Chapter 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigate the extent to which frequency and multiplicity of victimization, and the number of bullies, account for differences in students' psychosocial well-being and social standing in the classroom 	KiVa NL Wave 2	Control schools Grades 3-6 2859 students	Multilevel regression analyses in STATA
Chapter 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examine the use of the Support Group Approach in the KiVa program in the Netherlands - Investigate the short-term effectiveness of the Support Group Approach in reducing victimization - Investigate the long-term effectiveness of the Support Group Approach in reducing victimization, amplifying defending, and improving victims' well-being at school 	KiVa NL Waves 2-5	Intervention schools Grades 2-6 38 victims with SGA 571 victims without SGA	Coarsened Exact Matching in SPSS
Chapter 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigate the emotional and social cognitive antecedents of defending in bullying situations - Investigate the consequences of defending on one's social standing in the classroom - Investigate differences in the antecedents and consequences of defending between victims and non-victims 	KiVa Finland Waves 1-3	Control schools Grades 3-5 2803 students	Multilevel path modeling with multiple group comparisons in MPLUS
Chapter 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigate the co-evolution of bullying and perceived popularity, focusing on how bullying affects the creation, dissolution, and maintenance of popularity ties and vice versa 	KiVa NL Waves 1-3	Stable classrooms Grades 2-5 2055 students	Longitudinal multivariate social network analysis in RSIENA

