

MAKING LARGE-SCALE, SUSTAINABLE CHANGE:

EXPERIENCES WITH THE KiVa ANTIBULLYING PROGRAM

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In 2006, the Finnish Government decided to support the development of an evidence-based bullying prevention program and its' large-scale implementation across schools in Finland. At that time, no-one could foresee that the KiVa antibullying program would eventually be implemented by 90 per cent of Finland's basic education schools, that it would have remarkable effects on the prevalence of bullying problems, and would be evaluated and implemented in numerous countries outside of Finland. Studies indicate that KiVa is effective in decreasing bullying and victimization, but evidence also shows that the program is scalable and sustainable. In the present chapter, we will introduce the background and the theoretical base of the KiVa program.ⁱ Also the main findings of the evaluation studies conducted so far and the content of the KiVa antibullying program are presented. Furthermore, we will contemplate the key elements of implementing and sustaining a large scale intervention program over the long run.

Legislative changes leading to the development of a national antibullying program in Finland

The development of the KiVa antibullying program in Finland is an example of how strength of will and commitment on the part of politicians, policy makers, researchers, and school staff can make a difference, influencing the well-being of numerous children and adolescents across an entire country. The development of the KiVa program was originally an answer to the demand to reduce bullying since changes in legislation seemed not to be enough. For decades, a safe school environment and students' wellbeing have been given attention in the public discourse and policy making in Finland. For instance, the Finnish Basic Education Act has stated since 1999 that each and every student has the right to safe school environment. But even though the law was further amended 2003 to include a clearer statement that the education provider "shall draw up a plan in connection with curriculum design, for safeguarding pupils against

violence, bullying, and harassment, execute the plan, and supervise adherence to it and its implementation” (<http://www.finlex.fi/en/>) there was no apparent reduction in the prevalence of bullying. For example, the School Health Promotion Study conducted regularly by the National Institute for Health and Welfare indicated that the prevalence of victimized students had remained approximately the same in Finnish middle schools (Grades 8 and 9, which are included in the study) since the late 1990s.

Other large-scale international surveys also indicated the need to take further action. The results obtained from OECD’s (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) study and the World Health Organization’s HBSC (Health Behavior in School Aged Children) study in 2006 were controversial; although Finnish students did perform academically very well (PISA), their well-being at school was low (HBSC). It became clear that the legislative changes alone were not enough; something more was needed in order to deliver change nationwide.

This was the moment when the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland decided to allocate resources to a more systematic and long-lasting antibullying work nationwide. A contract was made with the University of Turku to develop and evaluate a new intervention program aimed at preventing and reducing bullying and minimizing its negative consequences. This led in turn to the creation of the KiVa antibullying program at the University of Turku, by the Department of Psychology and the Centre for Learning Research.

Mechanism of change: school bullying as group phenomenon

The expert team responsible for the development of the KiVa antibullying program had studied bullying for a long time, focusing especially on the peer group dynamics related to bullying and the implications for prevention/intervention work. This approach became the theoretical backbone of the program. A theoretical base, supported by empirical evidence, provides a solid starting point for building a strong program, the working mechanisms of which can also be tested in evaluation studies.

The participant role approach to bullyingⁱⁱ captures the essence of the social architecture of bullying. The role of peer bystanders is the core of the KiVa program. The basic idea is to make bullying behavior less rewarding for the perpetrator by changing bystander responses. If the students bullying others are not rewarded for their behavior they are less likely to bully others in the future. Peers may sustain or decrease the behavior of bullies by either supporting the bully or by giving neither attention nor approval for his or her behavior. Influencing the bystanders is likely to be easier than trying to influence the perpetrators directly; they may have deep-seated cognitions regarding the use of aggression and their behavior is often socially rewarded and thus functional.

Numerous studies provide support for KiVa's theoretical base. They confirm the notion that bystanders' behavior plays a crucial role in bullying. For instance, the more the classmates tend to reinforce the bully's behavior, the higher the frequency of bullying in a classroom.ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast, high levels of defending behavior (peers providing support for victimized peers and showing that they do not approve of bullying) is associated with less frequent bullying behavior. Evaluation studies have shown that in KiVa schools (as compared with control schools) only one year after the implementation of KiVa there was less victimization, bullying, and reinforcing of the bully, but more empathy towards victimized peers and more capacity to support and defend them.^{iv} In other words, the KiVa program brings about

changes in emotions, cognitions, as well as actual behaviors of children and young people.

Interestingly, the theoretical model of KiVa is further supported when mediating mechanisms of the program are investigated. More precisely, the decrease of bullying in KiVa schools is mediated through changes in students' attitudes toward bullying and their perceptions of classmates' tendency to reinforce the bullies or defend the victims.^v In addition, changes in students' perception of their teachers' antibullying attitudes (students in KiVa schools start perceiving that their teachers are clearly against bullying) lead to a reduction in bullying behavior. In practice, these results reflect the importance of communicating one's antibullying attitudes, stating out loud that bullying is not tolerated – and this should be done by children and young people themselves, as well as their teachers.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the KiVa antibullying program

The evaluation studies conducted during the randomized controlled trial (RCT) in 2007–2009 indicate that the KiVa antibullying program is effective in reducing bullying and victimization. During the first stage of the RCT in 2007–2008 more than 8,000 students (grades 4–6 of elementary school) participated in the data collection. After only nine months of implementing KiVa, the prevalence of self-reported victims and bullies were found to have decreased by 30-40% and 17-33%, respectively in KiVa schools compared to control schools.^{vi} The second stage took place in 2008–2009 with nearly 7,000 students from grades 1–3 and over 16,000 middle school students (grades 7–9) participating in the data collection. The effects were found to be moderate in lower grades but more inconsistent in middle school.^{vii}

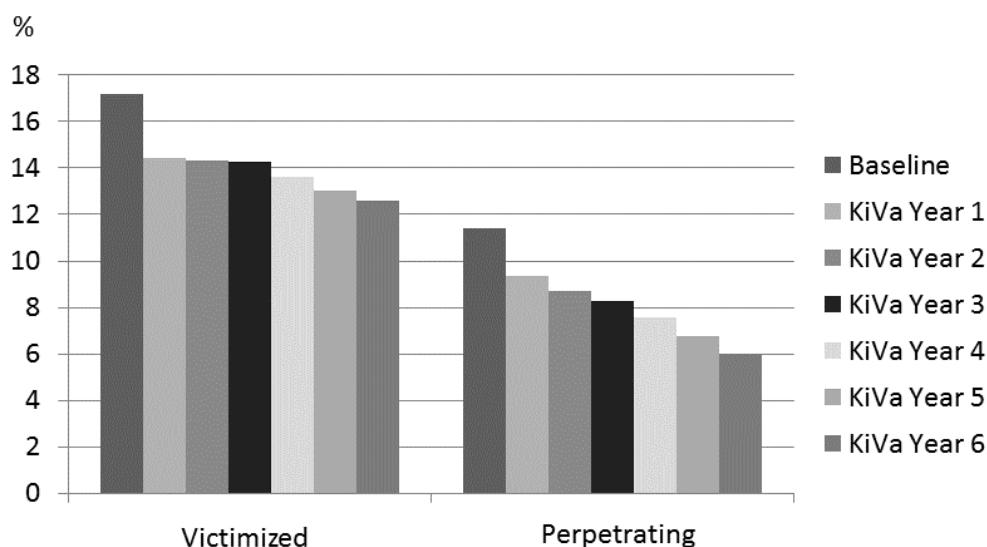
As could be expected, the effectiveness of the program during the nationwide rollout (2009–2010) was overall somewhat weaker than observed during the RCT. The number of self-reported victims and bullies decreased by 15% and 14%, respectively.^{viii} But, it should be noted that this is a significant proportion of students. If the decrease were generalized to the population of around 500,000 students participating in basic education in Finland such an effect would correspond to a reduction of approximately 12,500 victims and 7,500 bullies during one school year.

A positive trend has been maintained since the broad roll-out in 2009. More schools have started implementing KiVa and their progress has been monitored by annual student and staff online surveys.

Approximately 1500 schools, with around 200,000 students, have participated in this data collection. The surveys offer information about the prevalence of victimization and bullying across years. Self-reported victimization and bullying have decreased considerably in six years being 17.2 per cent at the baseline and 12.6 per cent after six years of implementation (see Figure 1). The proportion of student perpetrators has decreased from 11.4 per cent to 5.9 per cent respectively. As all schools involved in this data collection are implementing KiVa, we cannot tell whether a similar trend has taken

place in other schools a well: we are currently in the process of combining our data with those from other nationwide surveys.

Figure 1. Reduction in being bullied or bullying others (at least 2 to 3 times a month in the last couple of months) in 2009–2015 in Finnish



schools ($N_s = 634$ – $2,126$) implementing the KiVa antibullying program (grades 1–9).

From time to time, the question is posed as to whether general antibullying practices, such as KiVa, are effective in reducing all forms of bullying. This question is particularly raised in regard to cyberbullying. The evaluation studies of KiVa indicate that systematic antibullying strategies can be effective in reducing all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. The KiVa program has been found to reduce cyberbullying and cybervictimization in elementary schools and to some extent in middle schools.^{ix} Furthermore, the studies indicate that various forms of bullying are interrelated. If a student is being bullied in one way he or she is typically targeted by several

other forms of negative behavior and this can also happen online.^x In general, the KiVa antibullying program takes the view that bullying and cyberbullying are not separate phenomena. Cyberbullying is understood as a type of bullying which needs to be given special attention but which can be reduced by targeting the mechanisms behind bullying in general.

The KiVa program was primarily designed to target bullying and victimization not to improve the school climate or feelings of general safety. But as might have been expected, reduced bullying was also connected to a decline in anxiety, the more positive perception of peers^{xi} as well as to increased enjoyment of school, improved perceptions of the classroom and school climates, and increased academic motivation.^{xii} In practice these findings imply that well-planned and executed antibullying practices will not only reduce bullying but also improve the child's overall school experience.

The KiVa antibullying program: concrete and systematic tools

In order to achieve consistently successful implementation an intervention program needs to be systematic and solid. If the program offers answers to questions like “*Who should do the preventive work?*”, “*Who is in charge of solving the acute cases of bullying?*” and “*What should be done in practice and when?*” it is more likely to be successfully implemented at the school. An effective intervention program at its best offers clear and detailed guidelines for the whole school community to prevent bullying and to effectively tackle all cases.

In practice, the KiVa antibullying program consists of universal and indicated actions (see Table 1). Universal actions focus on preventing

bullying by creating an antibullying culture. Schools may communicate and show in many ways that they are a KiVa school. They may organize Back-To-School nights for parents, meetings for staff, and a KiVa kick-off at the beginning of each school year for students. The idea is to disseminate widely the basic idea of a school without bullying. Furthermore, there are highly visible vests for teachers to wear while supervising at recess time and posters to signal that the school implements KiVa and that bullying is therefore not tolerated.

Table 1. Universal and indicated actions included the KiVa antibullying program.

Universal actions	Indicated actions
Staff meeting Kick-off Parents' newsletter, guide, and Back-to-School night Visible symbols, such as posters, vests KiVa student lessons and themes Online KiVa games Annual online survey for both students and staff	Tackling the cases coming to attention Series of discussions with the victim and the perpetrator/s effectuated by KiVa teams Classroom teacher offers support A few high-status classmates are invited to offer support for the victim Parents are informed

An essential part of the preventive work includes student lessons (primary school) and the presentation of themes (middle school). The lessons and themes, delivered during regular school hours, include topics related to social-emotional skills and group dynamics generally, as well as issues related to bullying specifically. For instance, issues such as recognizing bullying, understanding the role of bystanders in the bullying process, safe strategies to support the victim, and the consequences of bullying are addressed. The manuals

are concrete with the goal for each lesson being described along with detailed descriptions of various teaching methods and activities (e.g. group discussion, videos, learning-by-doing). In addition, there are three age-specific virtual learning environments available online for the schools implementing KiVa. These online games provide additional material to the student lessons, along with exercises to rehearse the topics covered during the lessons.

Indicated actions are put into operation when cases of bullying are being brought up. Each school implementing KiVa is advised to nominate staff members to be part of KiVa team responsible for handling such cases. They are provided with detailed instructions and training regarding the procedure. There is empirical evidence that the approach is highly efficient. Victimized children who had participated in the discussions reported two weeks after the discussion that the bullying had stopped (78%) or at least decreased (20%).^{xiii}

In addition, student and staff surveys are organized annually for KiVa schools. These schools receive automatically generated feedback on both surveys. This allows schools firstly to follow the trends of the prevalence of bullying and victimization at their own school. Secondly, the student survey offers the possibility of comparing the results to the national trend. Thirdly, the surveys indicate what has been done in an attempt to tackle bullying during the year and what has been achieved. This is a simple and concrete way to evaluate the input compared to the achievements accomplished at the school level.

The KiVa antibullying program promoting whole school approach

The KiVa antibullying program is designed as a whole school program. Even the logo of the program reflects the idea that the entire

school community is holding hands together and standing up for the same purpose, to stop bullying. KiVa is an acronym, which stands for *Kiusaamista Vastan*, against bullying. In the KiVa program the school community is interpreted broadly and everyone has their own role in tackling bullying. Because the program is based on the idea that bullying is a group phenomenon every student is seen as part of, not only the problem, but also the solution. Therefore, it is also the students' responsibility to put an end to bullying. Teachers, on the other hand, are at the heart of raising awareness, providing students with the confidence and the strategies to respond constructively to bullying. Parents have the important role of supporting the implementation of the KiVa program and extending KiVa and its core principles to everyday life at home. Each school implementing the program has a KiVa team responsible for tackling the acute cases of bullying and ensuring that every student has a safe school environment. This requires some negotiating over who will be included in the KiVa team and over how the KiVa team functions in practice (e.g. which cases to appoint to the KiVa team, where and when the KiVa team meets).

The whole school approach means also an effective launch of the program from the very beginning. If the basic aim is to create a school without bullying it is essential that every member of the community is included and knows this from the beginning. Furthermore, KiVa should not be a short-term project but rather it should become part of the school's everyday practices. Antibullying work is not something that comes and goes: rather the idea underpinning KiVa is to create a school culture where bullying is not tolerated. In practice, we have noticed that taking this task seriously requires considerable resources and effort. Quite typically a school starting on the KiVa antibullying program faces the questions of what the program is actually about and how can it be implemented. Once these questions are negotiated and the answers are clear the school can implement KiVa successfully.

Taken together, the KiVa program requires that the whole school stands up to bullying. It is designed to become an integral part of the school's everyday life.

The KiVa antibullying program in the long run – supporting implementation

At the moment approximately 90 per cent of the 2400 schools offering basic education in Finland are registered KiVa program users. Some of them have already implemented KiVa over seven years. The question arises as to how the program can be effectively sustained over time. An antibullying program can only be efficient if it is implemented properly. This notion holds for the KiVa program as well. For example, the number and quality of lessons that teachers deliver is associated with the magnitude of change in student-reported victimization.^{xiv} More precisely, the more time teachers used to prepare the KiVa lessons and the higher the proportion of tasks they delivered during the lessons, the larger the reductions in victimization.

Some aspects of implementation have remained strong and others have declined during the roll-out of KiVa in Finland. There are two negative trends connected to KiVa lessons to be noted. Firstly, the implementation of student lessons decreases during each school year. That is, many teachers begin with active lesson delivery, but fall it short towards the middle and especially the end of each school year. Secondly, overall level of lesson delivery decreases across years. In 2009–2010, for example, an average of 78% of the KiVa lessons were delivered by teachers, but in 2014–2015 this proportion was only 64%.

In regard to indicated actions there are a few notable trends. Firstly, the number of cases handled by KiVa teams has slightly decreased across the years (from 7.5 to 6.2 cases per year). Importantly, findings based on annual surveys show that the proportion of students who have been in a KiVa team discussion and found it effective, has increased over the years. Furthermore, the follow-up meetings organized a few weeks after the KiVa team discussions and the documentation of the bullying cases have both become more common. These both play an important role in tackling emerging cases. The follow-up meetings (in which the KiVa team members meet again with the students who had been involved in bullying) are perhaps the most central factor contributing to the efficiency of the indicated actions. Documenting cases of bullying, on the other hand, enables to understand the overall situation of bullying in the school. All of these trends indicate that the program is heading in the right direction.

The KiVa program has been found to be effective in reducing victimization and bullying but it is only effective if it is consistently and thoroughly implemented. If the importance of antibullying practices were widely recognized on the part of the staff of all schools and municipalities a lot more could be done in future. In practice, for example, a head teacher holds a key role in creating space for high-quality antibullying work. Our experiences with the KiVa program indicate that the level of implementation seems to be higher in schools where the head teacher's support for and commitment to antibullying is high.^{xv}

Conclusion

The KiVa antibullying program is an example where theory and an evidence-based approach, combined with systematic and sustainable

implementation nationwide, can deliver desirable social outcomes. These elements are at the heart of the success of the approach. At the moment the core question arising is how to guarantee sustainable and effective implementation in the long run. Teachers hold a central role in implementing a high quality program. The students change but the teachers and other staff are there to stay. They need occasional motivation boosts and support for their extremely valuable work. KiVa newsletters, quality recommendations regarding high-quality program implementation, a nationally visible campaign, biennial KiVa days, and the provision of training and support for schools, are of vital importance in keeping up the KiVa spirit in schools. Sharing best practices and experiences seem to be extremely important for teachers.

To conclude, reducing school bullying is not a hopeless task but it certainly is not easy. A realistic aim for a prevention program such as KiVa is to reduce the prevalence of bullying in the long term and to ensure the sustainability of its carefully designed practices.

ⁱ See for more detailed description of the program

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