

## 12. Not just kids' play: bullying prevention is an investment that pays off

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### INTRODUCTION

Finland's decades-long efforts to prevent bullying illustrate how nationwide action on a major developmental risk factor can serve as a long-term societal investment, benefiting children and society as a whole. Globally, Finland and the other Nordic countries can be considered an "early bird" in bullying prevention. In Finland, awareness about bullying started rising in the early 1990s and various factors contributed to this development – books originating from other Nordic countries were translated to Finnish, first scientific publications on bullying appeared, and the first school shooting occurred in 1989. At the time, extensive media coverage highlighted that the shooter – a middle-school student – had been subjected to prolonged and intense bullying. Thus, over the years, many factors played a role in creating a "window of opportunity" to prevent and intervene in bullying with an evidence-based bullying prevention program nationwide.

In general, bullying is a widespread and well-known peer group problem among children and young people that has considerable impact on the daily lives of children and youth. Since bullying is a group phenomenon (Salmivalli, 2010), all children will inevitably come across it either as a target, a perpetrator, or a witness of bullying during their school years. Bullying is topical in many families and adults may recall bullying incidents that took place during their school years. Simple comments labeling bullying as "kids' play", "a normal part of growing up", and "just teasing" frame this behavior as harmless, severely minimizing the problem. Bullying is not just kid's play; rather, it should be understood as a considerable risk potentially preventing healthy development. It may have severe consequences on the mental well-being of the

individuals involved and can also lead to societal costs through later difficulties in social integration. Therefore, bullying should be considered a significant societal problem that calls for action, resources, and investments. In this chapter, we examine the nature and effects of bullying, with a particular focus on how its prevention, via universal and targeted interventions, can serve as a societal investment in the long term by building individual capabilities and institutional capacities. Throughout the chapter, special attention is given to bullying prevention in Finland, utilizing the KiVa® antibullying program as an example.

## WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying has been defined as aggressive behavior targeted repeatedly and over time against a peer who finds it difficult to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Although the definition has been debated during the past decade, this serves as a base for a whole field of research concentrating on school bullying and its prevention. Unfortunately, bullying is a fairly common social problem worldwide: the phenomenon is known globally from Western countries to the Global South and developing countries (Hong et al., forthcoming). The results from WHO's Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study (Cosma et al., 2024), including data from over 40 countries and regions in Europe, central Asia, and Canada, indicate that, on average, around one in ten (11%) of boys and girls from 11 to 15 years of age report that they have been bullied at school at least 2–3 times a month in the past couple of months. Moreover, 6% of adolescents reported that they had bullied others at school at least 2–3 times a month during the same period, with 8% of boys and 5% of girls admitting to such behavior. In Finland, the prevalence of bullying has been monitored since 1996 through the School Health Promotion Study which is conducted biennially by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2025), a governmental agency. Nowadays, the survey targets students in elementary school (10–11 years of age), middle school (14–15 years), as well as secondary education (16–17 years of age).

## WHY BOTHER ABOUT BULLYING?

Bullying causes enormous human suffering and considerable costs for societies via its devastating effects on mental health and marginalization. It seriously violates human rights and individuals' fundamental need to belong. Moreover, it is a violation of children's right to education, which entails the right to a safe school environment emphasized by the Safe Schools Declaration (UNESCO, 2025).

Most longitudinal research to date has focused on the outcomes of being bullied, and negative consequences have been widely documented. Victims suffer from loneliness, anxiety, depression, and various somatic symptoms both concurrently and later in their lives (Christina et al., 2021; Klomek et al., 2015; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). They also report higher instances of arrests, convictions, violence, and substance use than non-victimized children (Glassner & Cho, 2018), and even have a slightly increased risk of dying by suicide (Geoffroy et al., 2023). Consequences of early victimization seem to be more serious than later victimization (Hoffman et al., 2017). Moreover, research has shown that youth who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying (i.e., bully-victims or aggressive victims) face the most significant challenges among all children involved in bullying. These challenges span a multitude of outcomes, including academic difficulties, internalizing and externalizing problems, and lower self-esteem, all of which threaten their life opportunities (Graham et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2015; Pollastri et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2016).

The lives of those who bully others are also affected (Klomek et al., 2015). However, it is still unclear if bullying itself leads to problems later in life, or if other factors both cause bullying during school and later issues in life. On one hand, bullying perpetration in school-aged children has been associated with adverse outcomes later in life, including mental and physical health problems, poor well-being, low educational attainment, antisocial personality disorders, substance use, violence, and offending (Copeland et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2015; Ttofi et al., 2012, 2016). On the other hand, bullying may also result in benefits for perpetrators such as high status and access to romantic partners (Volk et al., 2022; Wiertsema et al., 2022). Overall, research linking school-aged bullying with adult outcomes is limited – especially regarding the heterogeneity of youth who bully – and common beliefs, such as that school bullies often end up in prestigious business or political positions, still lack scientific evidence.

Finally, ample evidence shows that merely witnessing bullying, even without being involved as a victim or a perpetrator, can also be a risk factor for well-being (Midgett & Doumas, 2019; Rivers et al., 2009). Bystanders may feel guilty about not intervening (Obermann, 2011), but witnessing bullying may also make them feel unsafe at school (Zacharia & Yablon, 2022), affecting their well-being and learning. In conclusion, bullying poses a risk for the healthy development of all children and adolescents – even those involved as bystanders, not just victims and perpetrators – and societies cannot afford these consequences.

## INTERVENTIONS AS AN ADD-ON TO SOCIAL INVESTMENT: THE CASE OF THE KIVA ANTIBULLYING PROGRAM

The devastating and multifaceted consequences of bullying have led to the initiation of bullying prevention practices and programs, such as the KiVa® antibullying program developed in Finland. The Finnish Basic Education Act (1998) already calls upon the right for every student to have a safe school environment. The act was further amended in 2003 to include the obligation for the education providers to “draw up a plan, in connection with curriculum design, for safeguarding pupils against violence, bullying and harassment, execute the plan, and supervise its adherence and implementation”. This requirement was later incorporated into the Pupil and Student Welfare Act (2013), which clearly posited that education providers need to have a plan to prevent bullying and take action when acute cases of bullying come to their attention, and this plan needs to be part of the local curriculum.

In 2006, the Finnish Ministry of Education decided to invest in bullying prevention and funded the development and nationwide roll-out of the KiVa antibullying program. This governmental initiative can be considered a flow factor. Bullying prevention programs are often school-based and consist of various components, and KiVa is not an exception. It includes universal components that are aimed at all students with the objective of preventing bullying from happening and targeted actions to be utilized when acute cases of bullying emerge. It also includes a monitoring tool to support the program implementation and provide schools with a data-driven approach to monitor the bullying prevalence and improve their antibullying practices.

The program was evaluated in a large randomized controlled trial (RCT) during two consecutive school years between 2007–2009. First, the program was launched among children in grades 4–6 with promising results (Kärnä et al., 2011b). The year after, the RCT was extended to grades 1–3 and 7–9, with more modest results especially in the older age group (Kärnä et al., 2013). After the Finnish RCT, the program has been evaluated in other contexts and there is evidence of its effectiveness outside of Finland as well (Huitsing et al., 2020b; Nocentini & Menesini, 2016). Due to the positive results obtained from the RCT, the Ministry of Education decided to fund the nationwide roll-out of the program, which was fast, and the program reached basic education institutions within the country with remarkable coverage. After a few years, over 90% of the Finnish primary and middle schools were registered program users. In 2016, a small license fee was introduced and some schools decided to abandon the program. Currently, the program is utilized in 40% of the schools

in Finland, and it is additionally being used in schools in 25 countries outside of Finland.

To evaluate whether investing in bullying prevention is worth the effort, the magnitude of change related to individual interventions is an important metric deserving attention. For example, Kärnä and colleagues (2011a) succinctly demonstrated the magnitude in practice when evaluating the effectiveness of the KiVa antibullying program among 150,000 Finnish basic education students during the first year of the nationwide broad roll-out. In this sample, the implementation of the evidence-based bullying prevention program resulted in a reduction of about 3,900 victims and 2,300 bullies within just one year. If scaled nationwide successfully to all 500,000 Finnish basic education students in grades 1–9, the intervention would have resulted in a reduction of about 7,500 bullies and 12,500 victims during the first year of implementation. This notion makes it clear what bullying prevention in practice means in terms of human suffering and in the lives of society's future taxpayers.

## INTERVENING IN BULLYING IS WORTH THE INVESTMENT

Over the years, many antibullying interventions have been evaluated, providing a foundation for an evidence-based approach to bullying prevention. Several meta-analyses conclude that school-based bullying prevention reduces bullying victimization and perpetration to some extent (Fraguas et al., 2021; Gaffney, et al., 2019; Hensums et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2022; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). For example, Gaffney and colleagues (2019) investigated programs' efficacy across 100 independent studies utilizing either RCT (n=45), quasi-experimental (n=44 effect sizes), or age cohort designs (n=14), and concluding that bullying prevention programs reduce bullying perpetration by approximately 19–20% and victimization by 15–16%. Similarly, Hensums and colleagues (2023) performed an individual participant meta-analysis, based on ten quasi-experimental or randomized controlled trials, and showed that interventions aiming to reduce bullying were effective, but also found that the effects were overall stronger among youth under 12 years of age and among those who had been most severely victimized at baseline. However, both Gaffney and colleagues (2019) and Hensums and colleagues (2023) report great variability in the effectiveness of interventions aiming to prevent bullying and discuss the need to better understand how contextual and individual factors influence the effectiveness of interventions.

In recent years, research on bullying prevention has increasingly focused on the cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit ratios of antibullying interventions. These economic evaluations offer compelling arguments for prioritizing and investing in bullying prevention in the public and political spheres.

By monetizing both the short- and long-term outcomes of participants who have received the bullying prevention program, compared to those who have not, these studies provide a concrete basis for assessing the financial viability of more resource-intensive prevention efforts since more intensive prevention efforts also cost more (Bradshaw et al., 2020)

Early investigations into the cost-effectiveness of bullying prevention relied primarily on base-case or simulation designs. Persson and Svensson (2013) used a discrete choice experiment to estimate the public's willingness to pay for reducing school bullying in Sweden, establishing a benchmark for social acceptability in future cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses. Building on this, Beckman and Svensson (2015) assessed the cost-effectiveness of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP, a bullying prevention program developed in Norway) in a typical Swedish primary school, utilizing data from administrative, observational, and quasi-experimental studies conducted in Norway. The results indicated that the external costs of implementing the OBPP were lower than the previously established willingness-to-pay threshold. A similar approach was applied by Persson et al. (2018) in their study of the KiVa antibullying program in a Swedish elementary school setting, which showed comparable results. They found that when implemented throughout primary school, the KiVa program was cost-effective, with the costs of the program falling below the willingness-to-pay threshold based on victim-free years and quality-adjusted life years' (QALYs) estimates. QALYs are estimates that are frequently used to examine the (cost)-effectiveness of programs and policies as they represent a holistic measure of health status, including longevity as well as quality of life (Greenberg & Pliskin, 2002). QALYs have monetary estimates that can later be considered when calculating the ratio between the cost of implementing a program with the long-term benefits that this program can generate.

More recent studies have shifted towards documenting the cost-benefit of bullying prevention programs using experimental design data. Huitsing et al. (2020a) provided the first evidence that school-based bullying prevention can yield substantial long-term monetary benefits, showing that the cost of implementing the KiVa program was significantly outweighed by potential long-term returns. Specifically, for every euro invested in KiVa, the estimated long-term return ranged from €4.04 to €6.72, highlighting a strong return on investment. Importantly, this analysis was conservative, focusing solely on the lifetime outcomes for victims and excluding potential outcomes to bullies, bystanders, and parents.

Jadambaa and colleagues (2022) took a different approach by examining the cost-benefit of preventing bullying in Australian schools using the Friendly Schools Friendly Families intervention developed in Australia. They categorized the benefits in terms of avoidable disability-adjusted life years (DALYs)

and found that a reduction in bullying victimization by 18% would result in 9,114 DALYs saved nationally. This reduction could translate into annual cost savings of AU\$120 million, even after accounting for the costs of program implementation across all schools.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that economic evaluations can play a critical role in advocating for social investment to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions in areas such as child development and education. Considering the strong evidence of short- and long-term consequences of bullying and the economic evaluations conducted so far, it becomes clearer how nationwide bullying prevention efforts can be seen as long-term social investments. Addressing this well-known developmental risk factor on a national level has the potential to improve individuals' quality of life and enhance their ability to function as full members of society throughout their lives. However, prevention is often relegated to later investment because problems that require immediate attention take priority in the political arena. The risk of such a strategy is that it does not align with developmental research showing that bullying in childhood and adolescence has a long-term impact on later adjustment. Presenting economic arguments on how bullying prevention programs enhance labor market productivity and reduce strain on the healthcare system adds significant weight to the case for immediate action. By framing the issue in terms of long-term economic benefits, such as a more productive workforce and reduced healthcare costs, the urgency and value of investing in prevention become clearer for stakeholders. The next challenge will be to advocate for sustained resources to maintain high-quality implementation of these complex prevention interventions, so that first investments and implementation expertise are not lost over time.

## THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING LONG-TERM PREVENTION EFFORTS

No matter how effective a particular intervention might be, it needs to be sufficiently implemented in order to produce desired effects. Bullying prevention calls upon systematic and structured effort, and it is not about passing projects or occasional themes brought up in educational discussions. It requires clearly defined methods, structured practices, and long-term commitment to these practices. Research indicates that consistent and ongoing efforts to prevent bullying are valuable and needed. The impact of prevention programs has been demonstrated to grow over time, as they continue to be implemented (Herkama et al., 2017; Huitsing et al., 2020b; Olweus et al., 2019). Unfortunately, in many cases, more resources are often allocated toward program development rather than toward implementation and sustainment. It is often overlooked in decision-making and societal discussion that sustainment of evidence-based

practices is not possible without sufficient funding, supportive educational structures, and political will – i.e., ensuring through social investments that interventions have the capacities to be implemented.

Most bullying prevention programs include multiple components, and a recent study investigating the implementation of the KiVa antibullying program in Finland over six years showed that the delivery of certain program components remains high whereas the delivery of others declined considerably over time creating a risk for the long-term sustainment of the effects (Herkama et al., n.d.b). Moreover, studies examining to what extent the program guidelines are being followed (Johander et al., 2021) and the program sustained (Sainio et al., 2020) bring into the spotlight the importance of high-quality implementation and possible challenges bullying prevention efforts face in everyday life at school. Examination of facilitators and barriers to implementation (Sullivan et al., 2021) and sustainment (Herkama et al., 2022), as well as contextual factors influencing bullying prevention (Pearce et al., 2024) demonstrate the complexity of everyday practices in educational institutions and clearly depict what is needed to successfully prevent bullying in education. Such studies emphasize the importance of resources – specially devoted time and trained staff – as well as values and commitment as factors contributing to successful bullying prevention in the long run in the educational context. To successfully prevent bullying, schools need evidence-based tools, but they also benefit from clear policies and guidelines, funding from the government to support the implementation of chosen practices, regular training, parental involvement, ongoing evaluation, and a supportive working culture.

In recent years, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) has conducted several evaluations that highlight the current efforts to prevent bullying in Finland. An evaluation focusing on schools' welfare plans uncovered that nearly all (95%) student welfare plans included the statutory measures to protect students from violence, bullying, and harassment (Summanen et al., 2018). But, as evidenced by another evaluation (Rumpu et al., 2023) focusing specifically on the usability and sustainability of seven bullying prevention methods used in Finland, several aspects of bullying prevention still required further development. For instance, it was recommended that schools integrate bullying prevention methods more thoroughly into their annual plans. In addition, allocation of sufficient time and personnel resources for bullying prevention and ensuring that bullying prevention methods become part of everyday operations and teaching were emphasized. This brings to the surface a significant gap in the field, as demonstrated by Sainio and colleagues (2024): Not all staff members perceive that they have shared and actively implemented bullying prevention practices in their school. This can have a severe impact on how the bullying prevention efforts are implemented and sustained in schools.

Research on bullying prevention conducted at the INVEST Research Flagship Centre builds on previous research and shifts the focus from program development and evaluation to implementation and sustainment of bullying prevention programs. The IMpLeMentation REsEarch Project (IMPRES) aims to develop and evaluate an evidence-based support model for schools (for more details, see Herkama et al., 2024). In this project, an implementation support model has been created, and its effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are being assessed through RCT. Twelve schools received implementation support, while another 12 served as control schools using the KiVa antibullying program as usual. Initial results on implementation fidelity are promising (Herkama et al., n.d.a). Schools receiving implementation support delivered more preventive lessons compared to schools without such support. Additionally, students in schools with implementation support reported less victimization immediately after the intervention and at a 12-month follow-up (Larose et al., n.d.). However, the impact on bullying perpetration was more modest, only becoming evident at the follow-up after 12 months. This project highlights the importance of enhancing program sustainment. Resources are wasted if new initiatives are constantly developed without evaluating and supporting the implementation of existing ones. Ultimately, all efforts to prevent bullying must overcome the challenges of high-quality implementation and sustainment in everyday school life.

Investing in bullying prevention can yield significant long-term benefits, both socially and economically. However, bullying prevention requires continuous attention and systematic effort in schools. In that sense, the initial resources devoted to developing, evaluating and implementing an evidence-based intervention program need to become focused on social investment in education. By offering an evidence-based institutionalized way to promote student well-being, we can capitalize on already invested resources and ensure sustained efforts in bullying prevention.

## LESSONS LEARNED ON HOW TO TURN INTERVENTIONS INTO SOCIAL INVESTMENTS

The Finnish case on bullying prevention shows how complex it can be to turn interventions into social investments over time. When aiming to develop and implement an intervention for common childhood problems such as bullying on a large scale, it is essential to understand that this is not merely about isolated efforts by academia, government or educational practitioners, but about a comprehensive and long-term process. Next, we highlight four aspects that have the potential to create a window of opportunity for successful intervention development and implementation benefiting society at large.

First, normative regulation plays a central role and has the potential to accelerate intervention development significantly. Laws and official regulations form the foundation upon which everyday practices in education and health-care can be built. However, it is not quite enough that regulations exist – their implementation also requires systematic roll-out, monitoring, and continuous feedback. Importantly, regulations should be reflected in concrete actions and practices – evidence-based interventions – within educational and healthcare institutions and other everyday environments supporting child development. In other words, the investment-intervention approach brings a practical dimension to the social investment framework by emphasizing concrete means for achieving policy objectives and critically assessing their impact.

Second, public discourse and societal acceptance should not be overlooked. For example, public awareness concerning bullying not only increases the understanding of the seriousness of the problem, but it also may create pressure and space for the development and scaling up of evidence-based interventions as the case of the KiVa antibullying program demonstrated. It is politically less demanding to allocate resources to initiatives perceived as socially acceptable. Creating such a public space might require, for example, active communication, advocacy, and information sharing.

Third, the development and implementation of effective interventions require significant resources – primarily time, funding, scientific rigor, and sustained capacity building. High-quality interventions rest on the systematic identification of problems, a sound theoretical understanding of the mechanisms of change they aim to influence, and rigorous evaluation through controlled and replicable research designs. This process, in turn, depends on robust research infrastructures, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the ability to translate findings into concrete interventions and practices.

Fourth, building and maintaining school capacities to implement preventive and targeted interventions requires early and sustained investment. When emerging challenges arise, timely responses are only possible if the necessary research and implementation infrastructure is already in place. In this sense, capacity building functions as a crucial *stock factor* in the social investment-intervention approach – i.e., capacities accumulate over time and underpin the system's ability to act effectively via the implementation of interventions.

Yet, *flow factors* are equally essential. They provide the operational resources needed to implement interventions when problems occur. Without long-term investment in capacity (stock), interventions cannot be developed; without short-term flow resources, even the best-designed *interventions* cannot be implemented. Therefore, a key challenge is to ensure that preventive interventions themselves become integrated into stock investments, strengthening the capacities of both individuals and institutions. This approach not

only supports sustainable development but also helps free up flow resources for the design and deployment of new interventions as future needs arise.

## CONCLUSIONS

By addressing bullying effectively, its immediate and long-term negative consequences, such as mental health problems, academic struggles, and social difficulties, can be mitigated. These improvements, besides reducing human suffering, can lead to youth developing into more productive members of society in the long run. From an economic perspective, the costs associated with bullying – such as healthcare expenses, lost productivity, and additional needs for educational support – can be substantial over time. Thus, minimizing talk about bullying as just “kids’ play” is harmful and distracts from the essential issue of viewing bullying as a risk for healthy development and bullying prevention as an investment in the future. In essence, effective bullying prevention is not just a moral question but also a financial investment. By fostering a safer and more supportive school environment, we can enhance the well-being and prospects of students, ultimately benefiting society.

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