

# Teachers' views and beliefs about bullying: Influences on classroom management strategies and students' coping with peer victimization<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

A multilevel design was used to test a model in which teachers' attitudes (beliefs) about bullying (e.g., it is normative; assertive children do not get bullied; children wouldn't be bullied if they avoided mean kids) were hypothesized to influence if and how they intervene in bullying interactions. In turn, it was hypothesized that teachers' strategies would influence how their students cope with victimization and the frequency of victimization reported by their students. Data were gathered on 34 2nd and 4th grade teachers and 363 ethnically-diverse students (188 boys; 175 girls; *M* age=9 years 2 months). Results indicated that teachers were not likely to intervene if they viewed bullying as normative behavior, but were more likely to intervene if they held either assertion or avoidant beliefs. Moreover, avoidant beliefs were predictive of separating students which was then associated both directly and indirectly (via reduced revenge seeking) with lower levels of peer victimization. No grade differences emerged for teachers' views or management strategies; however, minor sex differences were detected which will be discussed.

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*Keywords:* Peer victimization; Bullying; Coping; Classroom management

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The prevalence of peer victimization within the school context is an issue of central concern for educators, school psychologists and counselors, as well as developmental and educational researchers because children who are the victims of peer aggression are at risk for psychosocial and academic difficulties, including anxiety, low self-esteem, peer-rejection, truancy, and school drop out (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

Consequently, various anti-bullying programs have been designed and implemented to reduce such harmful behaviors in schools (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Shu, 2000). A main focus of such anti-bullying efforts has been to assess the ways in which teachers approach situations of peer victimization and to encourage them to effectively manage bullying within their classrooms (e.g., Olweus, 1991). Thus, teachers are often given a central role in the management and prevention of peer victimization within schools (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Moreover, general classroom management (i.e., competent teaching, monitoring of homework and behavior, caring for students) has been directly linked to the frequency of classroom bullying, as well as indirectly linked via classroom structure (i.e., informal student relations, concentration on school activities, social norms; see Roland & Galloway, 2002). In this investigation, although we acknowledge that classroom management strategies encompass a broad range of behaviors, such as creating an orderly environment in which to implement effective teaching methods and working with students to ensure academic progress, we focus specifically on how teachers manage episodes of bullying—that is, strategies teachers employ to intervene in abusive interactions among students. Because previous findings have shown that teachers differ in what they view as bullying behaviors, as well as in what they deem serious aggressive behaviors that warrant adult intervention (Olweus, 1993; Siann, Callaghan, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1993), the premise of this study is that differences in teachers' beliefs about bullying influence their responses to victimization in their classrooms.

### *Teacher beliefs about bullying and classroom management*

Although victims of bullying tend to view teacher intervention as an effective means of countering peer victimization, many students report that teachers are typically unaware of the bullying that occurs among their students (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Smith & Shu, 2000). Moreover, although teachers perceive they are effective at identifying incidences of bullying, researchers find that teachers tend to overestimate their abilities in detecting bullying as well as their effectiveness in intervening (Limber, 2002; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). In fact, although teachers may intervene, if their efforts are inconsistent or ineffective, their assistance may be problematic for victims. For example, Smith and Shu (2000) reported that confiding in a teacher led to more difficulties for a number of victims in their study.

However, when teachers intervene in a timely, consistent, and decided manner their efforts are usually effective. Olweus (1993) maintains that the most effective intervention involves close supervision of students (e.g., on playgrounds, in lavatories, hallways and classrooms), taking action to stop harassment early and directly, and never ignoring a situation that could possibly be victimizing for a student. Thus, teachers do play an

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