

# Identifying the Behaviours that Predict Bullying and Ways to Change them for the Better

Bullying behaviour is a significant social problem that can cause serious developmental and health damage for aggressors and victims. It encompasses various forms of aggression between peers (Lacey & Cornell, 2013), including verbal (e.g., name calling), physical (e.g., hitting) and relational (e.g., social exclusion) interactions. As a form of violence, bullying behaviour is characterized by intent to harm, an imbalance of power, and repetitions over time (Olweus, 2013).

## Assessing and Predicting Bullying Behaviour

Given the importance of understanding bullying behaviour at school within the context of seemingly inconsistent research results regarding bullies' social and academic skills, Elliott, Hwang, and Wang (2018) were motivated to examine teachers' ratings of students' social behaviours and demographic variables (e.g., students sex, special education status) as predictors of bullying behaviour. Using a large representative U.S. sample of students that comprised the 5- to 18-year-old segment of the national standardization sample for the *Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)* (Gresham & Elliott, 2008), Elliott et al. examined the relations among a comprehensive set of social skills, problem behaviours, and academic competence to determine which ones were highly related to bullying behaviour. The SSIS measures seven areas of social skills (i.e., communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, engagement, empathy, and self-control) and problem behaviours (i.e., externalizing including hyperactivity/inattention, internalizing, autism spectrum disorders, and bullying). Specifically, Elliott et al. used the SSIS *Bullying Subscale* (i.e., *Bullies others; Does things to make others feel scared; Forces others to act against their*

*will; Keeps others out of social circles; and Is aggressive toward people or objects*) to define and measure the frequency of bullying behaviours. Using the Teacher version of the SSIS and considering previous bullying research, it was expected that both elementary and secondary students' frequency of bullying behaviour would be positively related to an array of other problem behaviours, negatively related to all the social skills areas assessed by the SSIS, as well as academic competence.

***Findings regarding problem behaviours relationship to bullying behaviours.*** Based on existing research and experiences with children who exhibit aggression and bullying behaviours toward peers, Elliott et al. expected to find that both elementary and secondary students with high scores on the SSIS Bullying Subscale also would have co-occurring high levels of externalizing behaviours (e.g., acts without thinking, is aggressive toward people, fights with others, disobeys rules or requests, talks back to adults, lies or does not tell truth). They, in fact, did



find evidence with both developmental groups to support this expectation with Externalizing Behavior (i.e., under-controlled actions characterized by defiant, aggressive, disruptive and noncompliant responses); Subscale more highly correlated with bullying behaviours for secondary than elementary school students. Regardless of the difference in magnitude, this study and those examined by other investigators together highlight the co-occurrence of externalizing problems and bullying behaviours during both childhood and adolescent years.

**Finding regarding social skills relationship to bullying behaviours.** Elliott and colleagues also found evidence to support the expected relationship between the social skill subscale of Empathy and bullying behaviours. As expected, empathic behaviours (e.g., tries to comfort others, forgives others, feels bad when others are sad, shows concern for others) were negatively related to bullying behaviour for both elementary and secondary students. Thus, children and adolescents who exhibit moderate to high levels of empathy would not be expected to exhibit bullying behaviour.

One of the surprising findings from the analyses of the SSIS national standardization sample was that the social skill subscale of Assertion was positively related to bullying behaviour of secondary students. Assertion behaviours measured by the SSIS include asks for help, questions rule that may be unfair, stands up for him/herself when treated unfairly, and expresses feelings when wronged.

**Demographic variables relationship to bullying behaviours.** None of the student demographic variables investigated for either the elementary or secondary student samples contributed meaningfully to predicting bullying behaviours. This finding was unexpected. Given the sample size and its representativeness, this finding is important and indicates that bullying behaviour is not likely to be predicted by one's sex or special education status. Rather, it is more ubiquitous with regard to demographic evidence.

## Intervening to Improve Social Skill Deficits Associated with Bullying Behaviours

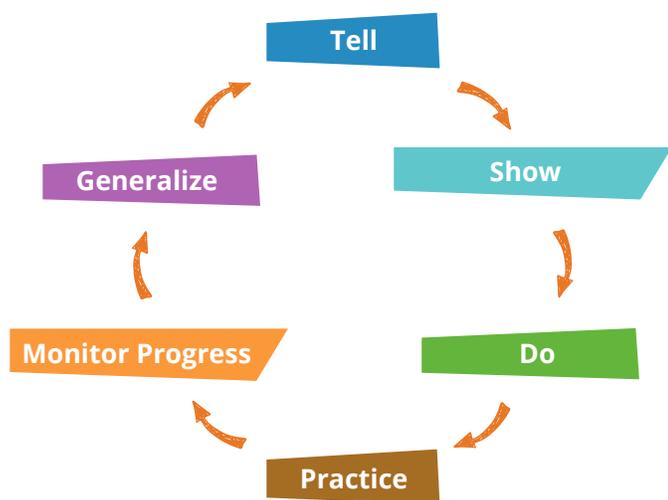
The findings that empathy skills and externalizing behaviours are predictive of bullying behaviours for both elementary and secondary students have implications for intervention efforts. Also there are intervention actions to be taken with some bullying adolescents whose assertion skills may be excessive. Specifically, the *SSIS SEL Classwide Intervention Program* (CIP; Elliott & Gresham, 2017) can be used to directly teach children and adolescents key social emotional learning skills proven to improve interactions with peers and thus reducing the need for bullying behaviours to influence others.

The SSIS SEL CIP can be used by educators and mental health professionals in schools to develop and improve social emotional learning (SEL) skills for children ages 4 to 14. Specifically, this program provides interventionists up to 23 skill units that represent core SEL competencies. These competencies, based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012) framework, are defined as **self-awareness** (recognizing one's emotions, values, and being able to assess one's strengths and weaknesses); **self-management** (being able to handle one's own emotions and behaviour so that they do not interfere with accomplishment of social tasks); **social awareness** (demonstrating understanding and empathy for the feelings of others); **relationship skills** (establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships in groups and dealing effectively with conflict); and **responsible decision making** (making ethical and constructive choices about one's personal and interpersonal behaviours).

## Identifying the Behaviours that Predict Bullying and Ways to Change them for the Better

SEL Competency Domain	SSIS SEL Classwide Intervention Program Skill Unit
Self-Management	Skill Unit #1. Listen to Others
	Skill Unit #8. Stay Calm with Others
	Skill Unit #12. Express Your Feelings
Social Awareness	Skill Unit #10. Do Nice Things for Others
	Skill Unit #20. Make Others Feel Better
Relationship Skills	Skill Unit #7. Get Along with Others
	Skill Unit #16. Ask Others to Do Things with You
Responsible Decision Making	Skill Unit #9. Do the Right Thing

The table above identifies 8 SEL skills that represent basic empathic behaviours (i.e., Skill Units 1, 7, 10, and 20) and self-control behaviours (Skill Units 8, 9, 13, and 16) that are incompatible with bullying others. Thus, if these skills can be developed and generalized by students who historically have used bullying behaviours like those measured by the SSIS, it is expected their bullying behaviour will be significantly reduced or eliminated because they will have alternative ways of getting attention and interacting with peers.



The SSIS CIP uses a six-step instructional process to efficiently and effectively teach social emotional skills. These components are **Tell, Show, Do, Practice, Monitor Progress,** and **Generalize**. DiPerna and colleagues (2015, 2016, 2017) in a randomized control trial in six elementary schools funded by the U.S. Department of Education provided strong evidence to support that the SSIS CIP six-step program works with a wide range of elementary students. Specifically, they found the CIP resulted in students learning social and emotional skills (e.g., listens to others, takes turns in conversation, asks for help, stays calm when hit or pushed, does nice things for others) and performing these desired behaviours more frequently, while concurrently reducing the frequency of many common externalizing problem behaviours, and increasing academic engagement and achievement test scores. This research documenting the **triple positive impact** of the SSIS CIP resulted in CASEL designating it “a SElect program for elementary students” (<https://casel.org/guideprogramsocial-skills/>).

By following this instructional process, most teachers or mental health professionals can teach a skill lesson in 25 to 30 minutes and provide a **S.A.F.E.R. intervention** – that is, a Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit, and Responsive program that students enjoy and learn from. With the additions of CIP resource materials – PowerPoint lesson presentation, video clips, Emotions Cue cards, Student Engagement Records – all students will be engaged and the intervention is **simpli ied** for teaching all students, especially those who exhibit bullying behaviours, important skills for improving social relationships and academic performance.

## References

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2012). *Guidelines for effective social and emotional learning: Quality programs for school and life success*. Retrieved August 20, 2012 from <http://www.casel.org/publications>.
- DiPerna, J.C., Lei, P., Bellinger, J., & Cheng, W. (2016). Effects of a universal positive classroom behavior program on student learning. *Psychology in the Schools, 53* (2), 1-20.
- DiPerna, J.C., Lei, P., Bellinger, J., & Cheng, W. (2015). Efficacy of the Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) Primary Version. *School Psychology Quarterly, 30* (1), 123-141.
- DiPerna, J.C., Lei, P., Cheng, W., Hart, S., & Bellinger, J. (2017). A cluster randomized trial of the Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) in Elliott, S.N., & Gresham, F.M. (2017). *SSIS Social Emotional Learning Edition Classwide Intervention Program*. Bloomington, MN: Pearson.
- Elliott, S.N., Hwang, Y.S., & Wang, J. (2017). *Teachers' ratings of social skills as concurrent predictors of students' bullying behavior*. Paper presented at the National Association of School Psychologists, Chicago.
- Gresham, F.M., & Elliott, S.N. (2008). *SSIS Rating Forms*. Bloomington, MN: Pearson.
- Lacey, A., & Cornell, D. (2013). The impact of teasing and bullying on schoolwide academic performance. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 29*(3), 262-283. doi: 10.1080/15377903.2013.806883
- Olweus, D. (2013). School bullying: Development and some important challenges. *Annual review of clinical psychology, 9*, 751-780. doi: 10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050212-1855

