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Enhancing Public Health and School Nurse Knowledge Around Bullying and Mental Health Issues in the Pediatric Population

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Abstract

Childhood bullying within schools and the community can leave lasting short- and long-term consequences that can extend into adulthood if not identified early on. Both the bullies and victims of bullies can be impacted both mentally and physically because of bullying. With the increase of technology and social media in schools, cyberbullying has also become a concern. A comprehensive electronic literature search was completed to understand if enhancing public health and school nurse knowledge around bullying and mental health issues would reduce the prevalence of adverse outcomes associated with childhood bullying. Results of the literary search found school and public health nurses play a vital role in the prevention and identification of childhood bullying and in informing practice and implementing change. School and public health nurses can assist in assessing the mental and emotional health of students impacted by bullying and provide students, teachers, parents, and community members the resources needed to help reduce the prevalence and impact bullying can have on the pediatric population. Additionally, school and public health nurses play a crucial role in the development and facilitation of anti-bullying prevention programs targeted towards young children.

Keywords: pediatric bullying, childhood bullying, nursing implications, nursing interventions, prevention, nursing curriculum.

Enhancing Public Health and School Nurse Knowledge Around Bullying and Mental Health Issues in the Pediatric Population

Bullying among children and adolescents in the United States (U.S.) is a widespread problem seen within schools with devastating outcomes if not identified and prevented early on (Benedict et al., 2015). It is estimated approximately 20 percent of students reported being bullied at school in 2017 (U.S. Department of Education Statistics, 2019). Bullying is a form of peer victimization and can be characterized as aggressive behavior, which is repetitive, intentional, and involves an imbalance of power between the victim and the aggressor (Benedict et al., 2015). There are many forms of bullying that exist today including physical aggression, teasing or name calling, verbal threats, and cyberbullying. With the advancement in technology and electronic communication among school-aged children, cyberbullying has emerged as a growing issue that carries many of the same negative implications as traditional bullying (Carter & Wilson, 2015). It is imperative school nurses stay up to date on the latest trends in technology and web communication platforms in order to understand the strategies needed to combat cyberbullying and promote internet safety.

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying negatively impact the psychological, physical, and/or emotional wellbeing of both the students being bullied and the bullies themselves (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Liu & Graves, 2011). Studies have found a correlation between bullying and mental health disorders. Both the students who experience bullying, as well as the bullies themselves, are at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem (Husky et al., 2020). Additionally, students may also develop sleeping difficulties, lower academic scores, and even drop-out of school (Husky et al., 2020). Suicide is noted to be the third leading cause of death in those age 10 to 24, and this is a direct outcome of bullying in children and adolescents (Cooper, et al., 2012). The prevalence of bullying and its' impact on the physical and mental

health of students is a public health problem needing to be addressed (Benedict et al., 2015). Often, public health professionals and school nurses are on the front lines in identifying and dealing with the negative consequences of bullying. This study will focus on answering the following question: Does enhancing public health and school nurse knowledge around bullying and mental health issues reduce the prevalence of adverse outcomes, such as depression within the pediatric population?

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to enhance public health and school nurse knowledge regarding identifying the existence of multiple forms of bullying, as well as enhancing the skills necessary to address the mental health effects that result from bullying within the pediatric population. Early identification and prevention are key to reducing the mental health burden associated with bullying. School nurses are integral in identifying bullying through the utilization of school-based behavioral assessments (Liu & Graves, 2011). School nurses also play a large role in addressing bullying, and subsequently reducing suicidal ideations among those students victimized by bullying (Cooper et al., 2012). Nurses have the innate ability to establish rapport with those they care for. Students are “more apt to confide in nurses” and because of this, they are often the first adult students will approach for help whether the victim or the bully (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 280).

Public health nurses also play a key role in communicating with parents and guardians on the importance of reducing factors at home that may contribute to bullying behaviors, such as violence and excessive television watching (Liu & Graves, 2011). School and public health nurses play a pivotal role in developing and implementing anti-bullying intervention programs.

Nurses need to have a better understanding of pediatric mental health and the many factors that influence it.

The purpose of this independent study will be to identify potential gaps in nursing knowledge in relation to bullying in pediatric populations among both school and public health nurses. Further investigation and research will be conducted to better understand how nurses have academically prepared and trained for interactions with both victims of bullying and their bullies in pediatric settings. This study will acknowledge the critical role that school and public health nurses play as a first line source of mental health care and will seek to help these nurses understand the crucial role they play in providing care for those impacted by bullying.

Theoretical Framework

The basis for this independent study is around Ida Jean Orlando's Nursing Process Discipline Theory. Nursing practice theories focus on concepts that directly impact a specific population (Gaines, 2020). Orlando's theory is a nursing practice theory that focuses on the nurse-patient relationship and has been beneficial in increasing the effectiveness of nurses in meeting the needs of patients through improved decision-making skills and conflict resolution (Tyra, 2008). Nurses are a crucial component in assessing student behaviors and identifying those behaviors that may be indicative of a call for help (Nursing Theory, n.d.). This is especially important in the pediatric population as they are a vulnerable population that tends to confide in the trust of school nurses. School nurses play an important role in the assessment and treatment of childhood bullying. They are able to gain a trusting relationship with students which allows them to gain a better understanding of the underlying causes of bullying behaviors (Liu & Graves, 2011). Orlando's nursing theory follows the standard nursing process of assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation, and evaluation to produce positive outcomes and reduce the

consequences of bullying, such as depression and suicide (Nursing Theory, n.d). This theory provides the framework to understand how nursing education can fill gaps with tools and interventions to improve outcomes and decrease bullying in the pediatric population. It helps to explain the role of the nurse in meeting the immediate needs of the patient (Nursing Theory, n.d.).

Significance

Childhood bullying is a global concern that has can have a significant impact on the growth and development of children (Benedict et al., 2015). Bullying at a young age can leave detrimental effects lasting into adolescence and adulthood. School and public health nurses are at the forefront of combating this problem; however, many may not have received specific knowledge and training for assessing, identifying, and assisting both the victims of bullying and their bullies. Studies highlighting a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted relationships between mental and emotional health and bullying would create a broader understanding of the issue, improving outcomes for both bullies and their victims.

Expanded research in the role school and public health nurses can play in assessing and identifying bullying and assisting with strategies to reduce instances of negative outcomes associated with bullying is extremely important. As the studies have shown, bullying remains prevalent, and has expended into new and less visible territory with the increasing popularity of social media. School and public health nurses can serve as a primary contact point for school age children. By working to deepen their knowledge and understanding of how to react to and prevent bullying, nurses will play an important role in increasing the mental and emotional health outcomes of school age children in a rapidly changing world.

Literature Review

A search was completed via the University of North Dakota's School of Medicine and Health Sciences library. The following databases were used to gather literary sources: CINAHL and PubMed. The Cochrane database resulted in no relevant literature. A variety of keywords were used to search for sources in all three databases including: (a) “pediatric bullying”; (b) “childhood bullying”; (c) “nursing implications”; (d) “nursing interventions”; (e) “prevention”; and (f) “nursing curriculum”. Articles included in the analysis were limited to no more than 10 years old with the majority being no more than 5 years old. Articles were also limited to English text only and those articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Articles referencing young adults ages 18 years and older were excluded in this search. Limitations were placed on this search to ensure current and relevant information was used. CINAHL has a reputation of being a strong source of nursing and allied health journals and because of this reputation, it was searched first (Hitchcock & Hooper-Lane, 2018).

Key terms used while searching the CINAHL database were *pediatric bullying* AND *nursing implications* resulting in three articles, none of which pertained to this search. A new search was used with the terms *childhood bullying* AND *nursing implications* resulting in 16 articles, four of which were included in this search. Another search was used with the terms *pediatric bullying* AND *nursing interventions* which resulted in one additional article. A final search using key terms *pediatric bullying* AND *prevention* resulted in 39 articles screened and two articles included in this search. A similar search utilizing a combination of the key terms was created utilizing PubMed as the search engine as it has an extensive health database (Hitchcock & Hooper-Lane, 2018). A total of approximately 500 article titles and abstracts were screened, and 10 articles that correlated with the research question and were used in the search.

The social and emotional development of a child is a vital component in a child's ability to learn and grow. School and public health nurses are key advocates in supporting a healthy environment conducive to learning. Liu and Graves (2011) conducted a literature review and noted a lack in success of current anti-bullying programs and the need to further understand the behavior development of the victims and bullies to improve intervention efforts. Efforts to understand childhood bullying and its' implications have developed since Liu and Graves review, and an increased effort to integrate anti-bullying programs into schools is underway. Salmeron and Christian (2016) believe "early identification of bullying is essential in establishing a safe environment where children can learn without fear and prevent the long-term mental health outcomes experienced with bullying in childhood" (p. 291).

A small retrospective post-test-then-pre-test study of 31 school nurses and three certified nursing assistants was completed to assess the effects a bullying assessment and prevention educational program has on improving the knowledge of school nurses regarding bullying in school. The outcomes of this study found a bullying assessment and prevention program to be valuable in improving the skills needed to identify bullies and bullying victims (Salmeron & Christian, 2016). Similar to the study presented by Salmeron and Christian, Letendre et al. (2016) believe in the importance of engaging support staff, including school nurses, in the "development, modification, and evaluation of bullying prevention programs" in order for the programs to be effective (p. 238). Letendre et al., conducted a qualitative study in an urban elementary school to identify the benefits of a bullying prevention program implemented schoolwide has at preventing rather than identifying bullying. By implementing this curriculum, students would develop the skills needed to interact with peers and gain access to support and strategies to prevent bullying behaviors from developing (Letendre et al., 2016).

Earnshaw et al. (2020) suggest in their article *LGBTQ Bullying: A Qualitative Investigation of Student and School Health Professional Perspectives* that there may be a disconnect between the perception of school health professionals and bullying among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students. Earnshaw et al. support the need for greater “support, guidance, and training” to improve awareness of LGBTQ bullying among school health professionals and provide the knowledge and skills needed to respond to and support LGBTQ children (p. 12).

What is immediately clear after evaluating the literature is that there is a strong correlation between bullying and mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression among both the bullies and those victimized by bullying. Social and emotional distress are significant negative outcomes resulting from bullying and this is noted in several articles. Rawlings and Stoddard (2019) suggest in their article *A Critical Review of Anti-Bullying Programs in North American Elementary Schools* taking preventative action by implementing anti-bullying programs that target children prior to adolescence can significantly reduce bullying behaviors. Benedict et al. (2015) believe the “relationship between mental health disorders and bullies is most likely multifactorial” where a child’s family structure and socioenvironmental factors play a role in bullying behaviors and the development of mental health disorders (p. 791). Husky et al. (2020) completed a cross-sectional survey with over 5,000 participants and found bully-victims to have the highest prevalence of mental health problems and experiencing psychiatric symptoms into adolescents. Similar to Benedict et al., Husky et al. also found a relationship between key sociodemographic factors and bullying involvement among children and suggested primary preventative measures within a family unit may be beneficial in addition to bullying-prevention programs. In addition to increasing the knowledge of school and public health nurses, Little

(2015) noted nursing curricula may lack content focused on emotional health of pediatric patients.

Increased attention has been given to associating bullying and suicide in two separate literature review articles. However, additional longitudinal studies are needed to help understand whether bullying is an independent cause or contributing cause of suicide (Cooper et al., 2012; Limbana et al., 2020). Additionally, both reviews found cyberbullying to be on the rise and Cooper et al. (2012) found cyberbullying victims to be twice as likely to commit suicide compared to traditional bullying. Hutson et al. (2018) support this finding and believe cyberbullying to result in worse outcomes due to the larger audience it can reach at any given time of day, and the ability to remain anonymous. Further research is needed to determine the best interventions to help combat cyberbullying (Hutson et al., 2018).

Discussion

The findings of this independent study reiterate the need to continue to expand anti-bullying and bullying prevention programs, both among faculty and through integrated curriculum among students. Several implications for school nurses have been identified throughout this study. School nurses can play a critical role in informing practice and implementing change. Research studies show it is essential that school nurses are properly trained in identifying children victimized by bullying as a means of preventing negative mental health implications brought on by bullying (Shetgiri, 2013). Early identification and prevention are crucial in addressing bullying victimization before it becomes resistant to change (Nelson et al., 2013).

Developing and implementing anti-bullying programs can help to influence practice and provide a foundation for nurses to utilize in assisting both the bullies and victims of bullies (Nelson et al., 2013; Rawlings & Stoddard, 2019). Evidence from several studies indicate anti-bullying initiatives aimed towards children, adolescents, families, school nurses, teachers, and the community, may help in the reduction of bullying behavior (Rawlings & Stoddard, 2019; Salmeron & Christian, 2016). Developing anti-bullying programs targeted at young children can help increase confidence, empower children to advocate for themselves, and encourage active participation in attaining the skills needed to prevent bullying behaviors (Letendre et al., 2016). Teacher trainings, use of videos, firm disciplinary methods, parent trainings and meetings, anti-bullying policy, and classroom rules are several important components anti-bullying programs should contain to reduce bullying and victimization (Shetgiri, 2013). School and public health nurses can help facilitate and lead these programs, taking into consideration the community environment, cultural backgrounds, and biological predispositions that may impact or influence bullying behaviors in order (Liu & Graves, 2011).

Husky et. al. (2020) believe primary preventative efforts aimed at families of bullies and bully-victims may be beneficial in reducing bullying behaviors. To prevent bullying and victimization in young school-aged children, it is essential nurses understand the risk factors associated with bullying and the strategies to reduce the incidence of bullying in elementary and middle schools (Liu & Graves, 2011). Anti-bullying policy design aimed at increasing school awareness and interventions, addressing parental deficits, encouraging bully-victims to speak up, reducing the stigma associated with victimization, and providing assurance to children against retaliation by their bullies, is vital in the efforts to combat childhood bullying and the serious consequences that can result (Chrysanthou & Vasilakis, 2020).

Cyberbullying is a growing concern considering the increased popularity in social media platforms and increased availability and utilization of the internet in schools (Hutson et al., 2018). Nurses should be aware of the impact cyberbullying may have on the pediatric population including the psychosomatic symptoms a child may experience when being bullied, such as headaches, nausea, stomachaches, and sleep disturbances (Carter & Wilson, 2015).

With bullying having a direct impact on the mental health of children, several studies indicate collaboration with mental health professionals may increase efforts in the prevention of childhood bullying. Mental health services should extend beyond the victims of bullies and should include the bullies themselves (Benedict et al., 2015). Identifying bullying behaviors and mental health problems through childhood screening has been suggested as a means to reduce the negative consequences bullying can have on a child's mental health (Husky et al., 2020). Increasing initiatives towards addressing mental health problems, either in a clinical setting or school nurse office, can help identify children affected by bullying that are too afraid or timid to share (Husky et al., 2020). Studies suggest targeted and sensitive skilled nursing assessments can be utilized to identify "victims and/or perpetrators of bullying" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 280; Little, 2015). Shetgiri (2013) suggests screening for mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, should be completed at regular pediatric well-child exams. Additional research may be needed to further investigate how emotional needs assessments can help nurses with early identification and prevention of mental health consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and suicides as it relates to bullying (Little, 2015).

Little (2015) found nursing curriculum to be lacking in both the theory and practice related to completing skilled nursing assessments focusing on the emotional health of children. It is thought undergraduate mental health curriculum may be stretched thin resulting in inadequate

content focusing on child and adolescent mental health (Little, 2015). Increased education around conducting a nursing assessment focusing on a child's emotional health and not solely a physical assessment may assist nurses in understanding the emotional development of children to guide decision making around addressing bullying.

More research must be done regarding methods to improve curricula among nursing students to achieve effective and adaptive outcomes for the prevention of bullying in school and public health settings. Multiple literary sources agreed in the importance of preventative measures including education of families and early identification, for which additional research could be conducted to assess the role that current and prospective nurses could serve in these education and preventive strategies (Salmeron & Christian, 2016; Shetgiri, 2013). Further research is needed to establish guidelines and best practices among nurses to achieve the desired outcomes of limiting the mental and emotional toll of bullying, as well as early identification and elimination of bullying among school age students (Carter & Wilson, 2015). Additional research conducted in a healthcare setting and in cooperation with school and community programs rather than solely in a school setting may provide additional information on cyberbullying interventions (Hutson et al., 2018). Furthermore, additional research identifying the types of media most often used for cyberbullying may help nurses better develop interventions and educational information collaboratively with school health professionals, parents, and community leaders (Carter & Wilson, 2015).

Conclusion

Bullying continues to be a concern worldwide and is associated with several negative mental and emotional consequences that can last into adulthood. The prevalence of social media has introduced new forms of harassment through the presence of cyberbullying, which is often

unrelenting and equally difficult to track. The mental health impacts of bullying are significant, especially among adolescents. School nurses can play a critical role in assessing the mental and emotional health of students involved in bullying, implementing interventions to minimize the health impacts of bullying, and providing care and resources to students, teachers, parents, and community members in order to reduce the overall prevalence of bullying (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Shetgiri, 2013). For this reason, it is important that undergraduate nursing education programs deepen their focus on child and adolescent mental health. By providing the skills necessary to effectively assess the impacts of bullying and reduce both the impacts and overall prevalence of bullying, future nurses will be better prepared to promote positive mental and emotional health among the students that seek their care.

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