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A Psychoeducational Program to Prevent Aggressive Behavior Among Japanese Early Adolescents

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This study evaluates the impact of a school-based intervention program on aggressive behavior among junior high school students in Japan. One hundred and four seventh-graders were enrolled in the program and completed Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 surveys. The program was implemented in two classes between Time 1 and Time 2 surveys (the first treatment group) and in two other classes between Time 2 and Time 3 surveys (the delayed treatment group). The program included four weekly lessons related to problem solving, stress management, and communication. The initial intervention group reported a significant increase in appropriate relationships with classmates. Aggressive behavior significantly decreased from Time 1 to Time 3 in both groups and from Time 2 to Time 3 in the delayed treatment group, but no treatment group effect was noted. Additional modification of the program may be needed to achieve decreases in aggressive behavior.

Keywords: *early adolescent; intervention; aggressive behavior; bullying; schools*

Early adolescent aggressive behaviors are widely recognized as critical public health problems that seriously threaten healthful development (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2004; Jessor & Jessor, 1977). These behaviors are associated with subsequent delinquent and criminal behavior and poor school adjustment (Coie, Terry, Akriski, & Lochman, 1995; Tremblay et al., 1992). Violating the rights of other students and teachers, damaging property, fighting, and bullying are particular problems for schools because they may

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inhibit learning, create interpersonal problems for those involved, disrupt school routines, preoccupy teachers, and contribute to school dropout (Addington, Ruddy, Miller, DeVoe, & Chandler, 2002). In addition, minor forms of aggressive behavior can escalate (Garofalo, Siegel, & Laub, 1987), and schools that do not effectively counteract this progression may create an environment in which violence is normative and tolerated (Goldstein, Harootunian, & Conoley, 1994).

A meta-analysis on school-based prevention of aggressive behaviors by Wilson, Lipsey, and Derzon (2003) showed that there were significant reductions in aggressive behavior among intervention groups compared with control groups. Intervention groups showed significantly greater pre- to posttest change among preschool and high school groups. The intervention groups demonstrated significant positive changes at every risk level, and the higher-risk groups (already exhibiting aggressive behavior when selected for intervention) showed greater change than the lower-risk groups (general population). The most effective intervention strategies appeared to be behavioral programs, such as social competence training (with and without cognitive-behavioral components) and counseling. Theory-based primary prevention programs of child and adolescent violence were reviewed by Fields and McNamara (2003), who reported that the social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) and the eclectic model (applying various theoretical perspectives) were the more popular and appear to hold promise in helping prevent youth violence (Fields & McNamara, 2003). Results from these evaluated programs in middle and/or junior high school, where aggression is most prevalent, vary depending on the specific program.

Some school-based intervention programs to prevent youth violence showed gender effects, such as reduction of aggressive behaviors, only for boys in the intervention group (Farrell & Meyer, 1997; Orpinas, Parcel, McAlister, & Frankowski, 1995; Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). These researchers emphasize the need to examine gender effects.

Programs to prevent and reduce bullying and violence in schools have been implemented in a number of countries (Baldry & Farrington, 2004; Farrell & Meyer, 1997; Grossman et al., 1997; Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003; Olweus, 1997; Simons-Morton, Haynie, Saylor, Crump, & Chen, 2005a, 2005b). In Japan, aggressive behavior and bullying have increased in the past decade (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2004a). In junior high schools (seventh- to ninth-graders, age range = 12 to 15 years), the prevalence of interpersonal violence, including violence toward teachers, students, and other people, increased 29.7% from 1997 to 2003, and damage to property also increased 43.5% from 1997 to 2003 (MEXT, 2000, 2004a). The prevalence of bullying in the past 6 months among junior high school students was 17.2%, that of damaging properties was 29.4%, and that of violence toward others was 35.2% (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2004).

MEXT has proposed governmental actions to establish appropriate environments to provide support to prevent adolescent problem behaviors (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2004). MEXT (2004b) has stationed school counselors in schools since 1995 to take care of problem behaviors, including bullying and problematic school absenteeism (a condition of students who cannot attend their schools because of psychological, emotional, psychosomatic, and social factors/backgrounds other than illness and economical difficulties). The effectiveness of providing a school counselor in each school has been recognized (MEXT, 2004a). However, school-based prevention programs for adolescent aggressive behaviors have been slow to be adopted, and no research has been conducted to assess their efficacy.

The present program was developed to prevent aggressive behaviors among Japanese junior high school students and was based on the Going Places Program, which was developed in the United States (Simons-Morton et al., 2005a, 2005b). The Going Places Program was designed to prevent multiple problem behaviors and was based on the principles of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), emphasizing self-efficacy and outcome expectations as social and personal consequences of anticipated behaviors. Interventions that increase early adolescent social skills can improve school engagement and commitment (Vazsonyi & Flannery, 1997), increase the potential for pro-social friendships, and alter attitudes and perceptions about problem behavior (Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002).

The present program targeted psychosocial mediators associated with aggressive behaviors among Japanese early adolescents. In observational analyses of data from a previous study, a variety of overlapping perceptions and attitudes—including school adjustment, peer pressure, peer influence, and self-control—were associated with bullying (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2005) and aggressive behaviors (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2004).

Modifying programs to fit the culture of the population of interest is an important element of program development and necessary for enhancing effectiveness, particularly when the program was initially developed in another country (Marín, 1993). Through extensive fieldwork and observation, the present program was modified to fit the Japanese junior high school students.

The purpose of this article is to report the results of a pilot study of the school-based psychoeducational prevention program on Japanese early adolescent aggressive behaviors.

METHOD

Design and Study Participants

Four seventh-grade classes (age range = 12 to 13 years) were recruited in one public junior high school in Tokyo. In Japan, the junior high schools range from seventh grade to ninth grade (age range = 12 to 15 years), and the school year starts in April.

Usual procedures of consent and confidentiality were followed. A study investigator explained the study procedure to the school principal, who explained the procedures to the seventh-grade teachers. Consent was obtained from parents at a special meeting. In the home-base classroom, students were asked by their teachers to consent to participate. The study procedures were reviewed and approved by the United Graduate School of Education, Tokyo Gakugei University Institutional Review Board and authorized by the Board of Education in the city. The intervention was implemented in the first term: May-July 2004.

The study design is described as follows:

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
First treatment group	O ₁	X	O ₂	—	O ₃	
Delayed treatment group	O ₁	—	O ₂	X	O ₃	

O represents observation time, and X represents intervention in this description. Students were surveyed in their classrooms at Time 1 prior to intervention. They were surveyed again at Time 2, which was 1 month after Time 1 and again at Time 3, which

was 2 months after Time 1. Two classes were assigned to be the first treatment group (FT group), and the remaining two classes were formed as the delayed treatment group (DT group). The FT group participated in the program between Time 1 and Time 2 surveys, and the DT group participated between Time 2 and Time 3 surveys. The classroom teachers administered the questionnaires in each class at the same time. To protect confidentiality, students put the questionnaires into envelopes after they completed them with their names, identification numbers, and classroom numbers under the cover page.

Of the 123 eligible students participating in the project, 19 were absent from at least one lesson of the intervention or missed an assessment and were excluded from the analyses. One hundred and four students (84.6%) completed all four sessions and three assessments and were included in the final analyses (FT group $n = 52$; DT group $n = 52$). Compared with the final participants, study participants lost to follow-up were not significantly different on gender and baseline aggressive behavior.

Intervention

The program was developed and based on the Going Places Program (Simons-Morton et al., 2005a, 2005b), which builds on the work of primary prevention studies that have attempted to prevent multiple problem behaviors by increasing school engagement through skills training. The program includes a social skills curriculum designed to increase self-control, school adjustment, adequate friendships, sympathy, and self-efficacy and to reduce aggressive behaviors.

To develop appropriate intervention components adapted to students and school culture in Japan, an ethnographic approach (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) was conducted in two public junior high schools during a 1-year period (Ando, 2004). The investigator spent considerable time observing junior high school life, identifying important situations and events of the students and teachers, and listening to frank opinions from students and teachers. Then a process evaluation of certain aspects of the program was conducted to allow modification of the overall program to suit the junior high students.

Through these processes, a program was developed that offered four lessons in the seventh grade. The key adaptation of the program was adjusting it to the current Japanese educational system. The program also adjusted to fit the culture of Japanese junior high school students from the viewpoint of their perceptions, social norms, beliefs, and common situations reflecting their behavioral preferences and expectations. Furthermore, the content was modified to include situations that students indicated were important sources of interpersonal conflict for them.

A certified clinical psychologist taught the program, with classroom teachers and a school counselor providing additional support. The program participants met weekly for 50 minutes during a 4-week period. The objectives of the curriculum are to foster skills and social competence through skills training and to influence perceived social norms about school conduct and problem behavior. Each lesson introduces a new skill and activities that facilitate students' application of the skill. Problem solving, self-management and self-control skills, communication, peer resistance, and conflict resolution are emphasized. A typical lesson begins with the objectives for the class and the introduction of a new skill, followed by activities using worksheets in which common problems are presented. Students then practice problem solving and use skills in various interactive group activities and role-plays. Then students share their group's ideas, listing them on a chalkboard. A summary sheet covering each session is provided the following week. Through

Table 1. Program Activities and the Purpose of Each Activity

	Activity	Purpose
Lesson 1	Creating the successful self: Students complete a worksheet to understand their own long-term goals and their positive and negative behaviors and attitudes about themselves using a set of 36 cards.	Identifying behavioral goals that are consistent with achieving their own image
Lesson 2	Recognizing their own patterns of interpersonal relationships: Students try to understand their patterns of interpersonal relationships in terms of self-assertion, sympathy, and compromise by a self-evaluation sheet.	Learning important communication skills such as self-assertion, sympathy, and compromise to cope with and solve problems in friendships
	Considering what conflict is: Students discuss their own and others' feelings through considering the consequences of submitting and avoiding in small groups.	Learning importance of managing and resolving by using appropriate communication skills
Lesson 3	Resolving conflict: Students discuss various approaches to resist peer pressure in small groups and they perform role-playing to handle it.	Enhancing capabilities to handle conflict and resist peer pressure
	Problem solving: Students discuss how to make peace and resolve conflicts with friends with whom they have interpersonal conflict or trouble in small groups.	Enhancing capability to resolve conflicts by using communication skills
Lesson 4	Recognizing their own distress: Students try to look back on the causes of their distress and their body signs.	Learning about the stress mechanism and the importance of taking care of their distress
	Managing stress: Students discuss how to manage their distress in small groups.	Enhancing capability of self-control against their distress

these lessons, staff responds to students with positive feedback and a constructive attitude. The main activities and purpose of each activity are shown in Table 1.

Measures

Some survey items were selected from scales written in English and translated into Japanese. An initial pilot survey was administered to determine student understanding of the questions and concepts. The questionnaire was then modified. The final survey consisted of items concerning student psychosocial variables and experience with aggressive behavior. In a previous administration of the survey, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for investigating relations between sets of observed and latent variables in each measure were performed among 2,923 Japanese junior high school students. The variables showed adequate-fit measurement models. Previous studies that

used these variables found that school adjustment, self-assertive efficacy to resist peer pressure on problem behaviors, and self-control were associated with aggressive behaviors (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2004; Ando et al., 2005). Therefore, these variables were selected to measure the impact of the intervention activities. The variables selected were reconfirmed to have good internal consistencies and adequate-fit measurement models. Each psychosocial measure was analyzed using the sum of the scores of corresponding items.

Aggressive Behavior. The content of the aggressive behaviors assessment was based on measures used in previous adolescent-health studies (Haynie et al., 2001; Headquarter for Adolescents in Japanese Cabinet Office, 2000a, 2000b; Jessor & Jessor, 1977). Students were asked about their involvement in the following three aggressive behaviors in the past month: violence toward others, damaging property, and bullying. Response options were 0 = *none*, 1 = *one or two times*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *once a week*, and 4 = *two times or more a week*. Based on theory and previous studies (Birnbaum et al., 2003; Colder & Stice, 1998; Resnick et al., 1997), the three behaviors were combined as aggressive behavior ($\alpha = 0.70$).

School Adjustment. School adjustment was assessed with items from the School Adjustment Scale (Simons-Morton et al., 1999). Students rated how well the items described them, with items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*false*) to 5 (*true*). Two variables were measured: appropriate relationships with classmates (three items consisting of “avoiding fighting with other people,” “making really close friends,” and “getting along with classmate”; $\alpha = 0.66$) and serious attitude in school (three items consisting of “following rules,” “paying attention in class,” and “getting along with teacher”; $\alpha = 0.77$).

Self-Assertive Efficacy to Resist Peer Pressure on Aggressive Behavior. Self-assertive efficacy to resist peer pressure was assessed by self-regulatory efficacy items developed by Caprara et al. (1998). Respondents were asked, “How much assertiveness can you express when you are asked by your friends about the following items?” They were presented a list of the aggressive behavior items, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*I cannot express*) to 5 (*I can express*). To analyze the data, violating others, damaging property, and bullying were combined as aggressive behavior ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Self-Control. Self-control was assessed by the Self-Restraint scale of the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990). It was developed to assess self-control and emotional distress. The items were rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*two times or more a week*). Two variables were measured: impulsiveness (three items consisting of “I become ‘wild and crazy’ and do things other people might not like,” “I do things I know really are not right,” and “When I am doing something fun, I tend to get carried away and go too far”; $\alpha = 0.59$) and aggressiveness (three items consisting of “I lose my temper and let people have it when I am angry,” “If someone tries to hurt me, I make sure I get even,” and “When I get upset or angry I lose control”; $\alpha = 0.72$).

ANALYSIS

To test the intervention’s effect on aggressive behavior and the psychosocial mediators targeted by the intervention (i.e., school adjustment, self-control, and self-assertive

efficacy to resist peer pressure on aggressive behavior), analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed comparing Time 2 measures between two groups (the FT group as the experimental group versus the DT group as the control group) using Time 1 value of each outcome as a covariate. Group \times Gender interaction was also examined to determine whether the program had a differential effect on boys and girls. One-way, repeated-measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to evaluate change in the variables over time (Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3) in the FT group and the DT group separately. Post hoc *t* tests using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons were used to clarify differences among subgroups. Time \times Gender interaction was also examined.

RESULTS

Program Implementation

The program consisted of four lessons. The number of students exposed to the lessons in the FT group and the DT group ranged from 59 to 62 for each of the lessons. Program implementation went smoothly according to plan, with all curriculum sessions completed within the time allotted. In the discussion after each lesson, the teachers and school counselor reported that students participated actively in all lessons and had high satisfaction. Most students indicated overall satisfaction with the lessons. Examples of program responses were that students were able to think about who they were, understood the importance of adequate friendships, considered the program helpful to their lives, and used skills from the program.

Targeted Mediators

Means of the targeted mediators at each time point are shown in Table 2. The FT group (experimental) indicated a more significant increase in appropriate relationships with classmates than did the DT group (control) at Time 2, using Time 1 value as a covariate, $F(1, 101) = 3.94, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.04, 1-\beta = 0.50$. However, no other treatment group differences were found. Because aggressive behavior tends to vary by gender, we examined the Group \times Gender interactions in the mediators and outcomes but found no significant differences. There were no significant Time or Time \times Gender effects in any of the targeted mediators in either the FT or DT groups.

Outcome Variable

Means of the outcome variable of the FT group and the DT group during three time points are shown in Table 3. Differences in aggressive behavior were expected from Time 1 to Time 2 for the FT group from Time 2 to Time 3 for the DT group. Accordingly, the one-way, repeated-measure ANOVA for aggressive behavior indicated a significant Time effect for the FT group, $F(2, 102) = 3.87, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.07, 1-\beta = 0.69$, and the DT group, $F(2, 102) = 7.27, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.13, 1-\beta = 0.91$. The post hoc comparisons indicated that aggressive behavior significantly decreased from Time 1 to Time 3 in both the FT and DT groups (p 's $< .05$). Aggression in the DT group also decreased significantly from Time 2 to Time 3 ($p < .01$). However, ANCOVA showed no significant difference between the FT and the DT group, and the Group \times Gender interaction and Time \times Gender interaction effects were not significant.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Targeted Mediators at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3

Variable	Range	Time	FT group (<i>n</i> = 52)		DT group (<i>n</i> = 52)	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Appropriate relationships with classmates	3-15	Time 1	12.29	2.62	11.69	2.25
		Time 2	12.60 ^a	2.43	11.52	2.34
		Time 3	12.19	2.72	11.62	2.03
Serious attitude in school	3-15	Time 1	12.61	2.13	11.74	2.29
		Time 2	12.65	1.86	12.19	2.28
		Time 3	12.13	2.30	11.89	2.42
Impulsiveness	0-12	Time 1	4.30	2.69	4.17	2.26
		Time 2	4.08	2.37	3.90	2.42
		Time 3	3.57	2.73	3.65	2.47
Aggressiveness	0-12	Time 1	3.77	2.68	3.87	3.02
		Time 2	3.69	2.55	3.92	3.44
		Time 3	2.96	2.68	3.27	2.98
Self-assertive efficacy to resist peer pressure on aggressive behavior	3-15	Time 1	13.17	2.60	13.46	2.38
		Time 2	13.44	2.18	13.04	3.12
		Time 3	13.38	2.82	13.67	2.20

NOTE: Each variable was scored higher as the tendency was higher. FT group = first treatment group; DT group = delayed treatment group; range = possible range of scores.

a. The FT group (experimental) indicated significant increase in appropriate relationships with classmates from Time 1 to Time 2 compared with the DT group (control), using Time 1 value as a covariate, $F(1, 101) = 3.94, p < .05$.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Outcome Variable at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3

Variable	Range	Time	FT group (<i>n</i> = 52)		DT group (<i>n</i> = 52)	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Aggressive behavior	0-12	Time 1	1.00	1.62	1.06	1.63
		Time 2	0.96	1.58	0.85	1.26
		Time 3	0.54 ^a	1.24	0.35 ^{a,b}	0.88

NOTE: Each variable was scored higher as the tendency was higher. FT group = first treatment group; DT group = delayed treatment group; range = possible range of scores. No significant treatment-group differences found.

a. Significant effect of time from Time 1 to Time 3.

b. Significant effect of time from Time 2 to Time 3.

DISCUSSION

The present study tested the efficacy of a school-based, social-skills training program. Implementation and participant reactions to the program were satisfactory. There was a significant effect of the program from Time 1 to Time 2 in the FT group but no effect in the DT group from Time 2 to Time 3 as would be expected in appropriate

relations with classmates. Therefore, the evidence for a treatment group effect on peer relationships is inconsistent. Furthermore, no treatment-group effects were shown for aggression. Surprisingly, aggression decreased in both groups during the intervention period, suggesting that a third variable affected both groups to reduce aggression. However, we could identify no school, community, or media events that occurred during this time that may have influenced the targeted outcome.

In Japan, aggressive behavior such as bullying has generally been understood in the context of the group dynamics of bullies, victims, audiences (i.e., cheering and enjoying), and bystanders (i.e., pretending not to know) in a group in a classroom (Morita, 1985). Japanese adolescents who engage in aggressive behavior tend to show a lower level of trust toward others (Ando, Asakura, & Nakayama, 2004). Therefore, establishing appropriate relationships with classmates may be one of the important mediators of aggressive behavior. This study provides some promising evidence for the potential of social-skills training to increase classmate relationships.

Based on our preliminary work and understanding of Japanese culture, we adapted the American school-based psychoeducational intervention, the Going Places Program, to implement a Japanese school-based intervention program. This study included an extensive theory-based intervention, the use of ethnographic methods for program development (Ando, 2004), and evaluation using well-defined outcome measures (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2004; Ando et al., 2005). This program was also implemented with the full cooperation of the school staff, potentially building trust among school staff and students. However, the study is limited by its small, one-school research participation, short observation period, and design.

There are several possible explanations for the lack of the consistent intervention effects. Time 2 assessment in the FT group might have been too close to Time 1, coming just 1 week after the final lesson, which may not have allowed enough time for students to reevaluate their relationships with classmates. Another reason may be the quite small number of research participants. Although not statistically significant, impulsiveness and aggressiveness decreased slightly, and self-assertive efficacy to resist peer pressure on aggressive behavior increased slightly from Time 1 to Time 2 in the FT group and from Time 2 to Time 3 in the DT group. A third possible explanation is that the intervention components targeted all students in the seventh grade, and only those students with high levels of aggressive behaviors might benefit from an intervention of this type.

We did not find any gender differences over time. Some studies targeting junior high or middle school students have found gender differences in the effectiveness of the intervention. Significant reduction of physical fighting at postintervention for boys was shown in a previous study (Farrell & Meyer, 1997). In other studies, boys increased physical aggression and bullying relative to girls (Menesini et al., 2003; Van Schoiack-Edstrom et al., 2002). The reason for the lack of a gender effect in our study may be the small number of research participants.

The study employed a nonequivalent control-group, quasi-experiment design. This approach has the great advantage of allowing for the provision of the intervention to both treatment groups and providing program evaluation that controls for various threats to validity. However, the small number of classes and lack of true randomization are important limitations. Furthermore, the usefulness of these findings depends on the validity of youth self-reports. Self-reported data is fundamental to behavior research, yet validation of self-reported problem behaviors is difficult. Additional evaluation by

teachers and parents may be useful to confirm the outcome. More studies, including longitudinal research with experimental and control groups, are needed. Comprehensive programs involving community, school, and family components that support young people's application of social and life skills across varied settings should be considered as a growing number of multi-year, multi-component school, family, and community programs may produce multiple benefits for young people (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Greenberg et al., 2003).

Implications for Practice

We based our program on the Going Places Program (Simons-Morton et al., 2005a, 2005b) because of our familiarity with it. However, despite its strong theoretical basis and well-developed program activities, we realized that it needed to be adapted to be suitable for the Japanese culture. Through discussions with key informants using other qualitative assessments, we modified the program prior to initiation in the following key ways: (a) identification of psychosocial factors associated with aggressive behaviors in the target group and (b) cultural-specific adaptation that considered perceptions, social norms, beliefs, and common situations of the students and the current educational systems. The findings are promising, but additional research is needed to improve the link between the program activities and the targeted mediators. In future research, the program could be tested after modifying it to include additional lessons. Teachers or counselors who are highly familiar with the students and schools could implement the curriculum.

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