Key Terms Defined

**Disciplinary structure** – Students perceive school rules as strict, but fair, with all students being treated equally.

**Student support** – Students perceive their teachers and other adults at school as concerned about them and feel comfortable seeking help from them.

**Authoritative school** – a school climate with high disciplinary structure and student support

**Authoritarian school** – a school climate with high disciplinary structure but low student support

**Permissive school** – a school climate with low disciplinary structure but high student support

**Neglectful school** – a school climate with low disciplinary structure and low student support

**Prevalence of teasing and bullying (PTB)** – a scale asking students how much teasing and bullying they observe at school in areas such as clothing and physical appearance, race and ethnicity, and sexual topics.

**Background**

Decades of research in developmental psychology has found that the most effective parents are authoritative, meaning that they provide both strict discipline and emotional support for their children, as distinguished from authoritarian parents who are strict but not supportive, permissive parents who are supportive but not strict, and neglectful parents who are neither strict nor supportive.

Studies of school administrator attitudes toward discipline reveal two groups: one that advocates a strict disciplinarian approach and another that favors a more supportive approach. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Authoritative school climate theory extends the model of good parenting to schools, hypothesizing that the most effective schools are characterized by both high disciplinary structure and high student support. High structure is present when students regard school discipline as strict but fair and high student support is present when students feel their teachers and other adults at school are concerned about them and feel comfortable seeking help from them.

Research has found that there is less bullying and other forms of student aggression and misbehavior in schools with a positive school climate, but there is little consensus on what constitutes a positive school climate and no established theoretical model to guide school climate research. Using authoritative school climate theory, the present study developed scales to measure the two key dimensions of disciplinary structure and student support and investigated their relations with student reports of the prevalence of teasing and bullying (PTB) at school.

**Study**

An anonymous online survey was completed by 39,364 7th and 8th grade students attending 423 of 430 eligible Virginia public schools, providing a large and demographically diverse statewide sample. The survey included scales to measure disciplinary structure, student support, and the prevalence of teasing and bullying (PTB) at school.* As displayed in Figure 1, a multilevel statistical model was constructed that incorporated demographic characteristics of the school (school size, percentage of minority students, and parent education level as an
indicator of socioeconomic status) and demographic characteristics of the students (gender, minority status, parent education level). Within the context of this comprehensive model, the focus of this brief is on student perceptions of PTB. These analyses found that schools with larger enrollment, more minority students, and lower parental education tended to have more PTB, and that students who were female, minority, and from families with lower parental education reported more PTB in their school. Controlling for all demographic influences, higher disciplinary structure and student support were associated with lower PTB and explained 54% of the variance in PTB across schools (For more information, see Cornell, Shukla, and Konold, 2014).

In order to display the statistical results in a more consumer-friendly format, schools were identified as high (above the median) or low (below the median) on the measures of structure and support, and then grouped into four categories: authoritative (high structure and high support), authoritarian (high structure and low support), permissive (low structure and high support), and neglectful (low structure and low support). Each school was also ranked by percentile on PTB. Figure 2 shows the average PTB percentile for schools in each of the four school climate categories. As expected, authoritative schools show a significantly lower level of PTB than other types of schools.

One limitation is that these are correlational findings; controlled intervention studies would be useful to demonstrate that improving structure and support will result in improved student behavior.

* Additional measures of bullying victimization and peer aggression are included in Figure 1 but these analyses are not included in this report.

**Figure 1. Statistical Model Showing School-level and Student-level Variables Influencing the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying, Bullying Victimization, and General Victimization**
Implications for Violence Prevention

The over-arching message for teachers and school administrators is that they do not have to choose between a “get tough” versus a “be supportive” approach to school discipline. The most advantageous approach is to have high expectations for student behavior with strict but fair discipline and at the same time to communicate concern and respect for students that makes them feel supported and willing to seek help from teachers and other school staff members.

Previous studies support the findings of this study for different measures of bullying and peer aggression, and for other student outcomes, including student misbehavior resulting in school suspension and aggression directed toward teachers (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; 2012; Gregory et al., 2010; Konold et al., 2014).

School climate surveys should include scales to measure student perceptions of disciplinary structure and student support, and school administrators should use survey results to guide school improvement planning. Special attention should be given to high risk groups, including students from racial, ethnic, or sexual minority groups, students with disabilities, and students from immigrant families.

References


Authoritative School Climate and Peer Victimization


Other resources for information on this topic


Virginia Youth Violence Project. [http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu](http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu)

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