

Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Child on Bullying Behaviors among Children

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Abstract

Aims: Bullying is an ever-increasing phenomenon in schools and it has far-reaching consequences on children and adolescents, for which necessary measures must be taken to prevent and reduce it. This study was aimed to investigate the effectiveness of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for child (MBCT-C) on bullying behavior among children. **Materials and Methods:** the population of this study consisted of Grade 3 through 5 students in Kashan town in 2017–2018 school years. The sample consisted of 20 students who had been selected by inclusion and exclusion criteria. The conventional sampling method was used. A quasi-experimental design was used in this study. Participants completed the Illinois Bullying Scale before and after the intervention of experimental and control groups. Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance. **Results:** The findings showed that MBCT-C had a significant effect on bullying behavior reduction and the effect size in this intervention was 0.89. Furthermore, results from individual mean scores in bullying scale questions indicated that in pretest both experimental and control groups, “excluding others from in a group of friends” was the most frequent behavior and mindfulness training had effectively the highest effect on decreasing this character. **Conclusion:** It suggests that intervention concerning diminishing bullying behaviors may start with mindfulness training.

Keywords: Bullying, child, mindfulness, schools

INTRODUCTION

Currently, aggression in school has become an important issue for all teachers, principals, and school officials.^[1] Bullying is one of the most extensive challenges facing schools which is a subset of aggression.^[2] The extent of this issue is such that one of the frequent problems of students is being a victim of violence by others in schools, and on average, 10% of elementary and middle students are victims of violence and aggression by their peers.^[3] For this reason, bullying has become a global problem in psychology.^[4] Bullying was first introduced globally by Olweus.^[5] His definition of bullying consisted of four criteria: (a) verbal bullying including derogatory comments and bad names, (b) social exclusion and isolation, (c) physical bullyings such as hitting, kicking, shoving, and threatening, and (d) lies and sending minatory messages through E-mail or notes.^[6] According to Olweus,

three important components which differentiate between bullying and aggression are: a pattern of behavior repeated over time, involves imbalance of power or strength between victim and the person who bully on purpose.^[1]

According to Sampson,^[7] bullying involves repeated physical, verbal, or psychological attacks or intimidations directed against a victim who cannot properly defend him/herself. Bullying includes assault, tripping, intimidation, rumor-spreading and isolation, demands for money, destruction of property, theft of valued possessions, destruction of another’s work, and name-calling. It is noteworthy that aggression, violence, and

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bullying are usually regarded as synonyms, while violence and bullying are considered as different types of aggression. According to Olweus, three important components which differentiate between bullying and aggression are: a pattern of behavior repeated over time, involves imbalance of power or strength between victim and the person who bully on purpose.^[8] Another key element which should be noted in the bullying definition is that bullying has no specific reason and occurs in social cohorts.^[9] Students, who bully believe that they are superior to others, exhibit aggressive behaviors toward their peers and have positive attitude toward bullying.^[10] These people use aggressive behaviors to resolve conflicts in their interpersonal dialogue because they lack alternative social skills to resolve conflicts.^[11] Bullying has significant impacts on the future of both victim and bullying children and their future relationships.^[7] Children and adults who bully often suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and even self-mutilation thoughts. Children who bully and annoy others are more likely to exhibit antisocial and criminal behaviors.^[12] Furthermore, it is often observed that both bully and victim children will experience numerous weaknesses in adolescence ages. In addition, victims of bullying experience problems such as incompatibility in school.^[13]

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for child (MBCT-C) is expected to be effective in bullying reduction. In fact, this concept nurtures a distinct form of being in individuals and helps them embrace thoughts formed in their minds as well as things happen around them. Mindfulness is based upon Buddhist traditional practices and current mindfulness practices are rooted in a more extensive framework.^[14] In a common sense, mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.^[15] Tan and Martin also defined mindfulness as a nonjudgmental awareness and accepting of present moment experience with intentional attendance to one's ongoing stream of thoughts, sensations, and emotions as they arise.^[16] Napoli *et al.* define three key elements of mindfulness as focus on the breath, ability to tune into events occurring within the body and mind, and the act of being a witness to one's own personal experience.^[17] A common element in all these definitions is a focus on attention which is at the core of traditional Buddhist mindfulness practices. On the benefits of mindfulness in interpersonal relationships, mental health foundation states that these practices cause that people can reduce their negative interpersonal behaviors such as nervousness and aggression through responding instead of reacting.^[18] Introducing children to this practice may better prepare them for present and future challenges. The openness and readiness to learn that many children possess may make them receptive to learning mindfulness.^[19]

Dameron^[20] has shown that bullying is characterized by lack of empathy and impulsivity which works to break the cycle of automatic reaction and has been shown to increase awareness of others. Mindfulness programs aim to teach students how to pause and consider how their actions will

affect other people.^[20] Evidence indicated that there is a relationship between mindfulness and bullying behavior. In a study, relationship between mindfulness, bullying behavior, and self-compassion among school children in Pakistan was investigated. Results showed that mindfulness and bullying behavior negatively correlated with each other.^[21] Recently, Foody and Samara emphasized on mindfulness training role in school-based antibullying programs.^[22] One recent study of Chinese children found that the effect of bullying victimization on depressive symptoms and the mediating effect of resilience was moderated by mindfulness.^[23] Gonynor explored relationship between mindfulness and bullying and found that mindfulness may be one effective practice for directing and enhancing emotion regulation and awareness to stay connected to the present moment. Those students with a higher score in mindfulness feel safe, relaxed, and less stressed and were less likely to exhibit bully behaviors because they experience inner strength and inner peace that ultimately contributes to interacting with peers in peaceful ways.^[24]

This therapy is effective in treating many mental problems and diseases through affecting emotional aspects of individual lives. Given that, many problems of bully children are emotional in nature^[25] and based on research evidence as well as the point that so far, design and implementation of an intervention which handles bullying behaviors effectively could have increasing and accelerating effect. Hence, in the present study, we tried to investigate the effects of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on bullying behavior.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The population was all Grades 3 through 5 school students in Kashan town in 2017–2018 school years. Conventional sampling method was used. It was used a quasi-experimental design. In the guide to this intervention, a maximum of 10 people must be included in each group. Theoretical foundations for selecting these people were based on Semple and Lee's recommendations (package designers) who believe that people attending these sessions must be <10 people so that the intervention has enough validity.^[26] First, Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS) was performed and those who scored high in the bullying questionnaire were randomly divided into two groups. Thus, 20 students (10 in the experimental group and 10 in the control group) were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for sample group selection were as follows: inclusion criteria were obtaining a higher than mean standard deviation score in IBS to identify people with bully behaviors, studying in third through fifth grades, and disaffiliation in other parallel interventions. An exclusion criterion was absence more than four sessions and a decision to leave study and inclusion criteria were no severe physical disease and mental problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Consent form for participation in the study was obtained from all parents. Summary of sessions was reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the intervention program

| Session and theme | Key points | Home practices |
|---|--|---|
| Being on Automatic Pilot | We live much of our lives on automatic pilot Mindfulness exists, and it is a different, more helpful way of being in the world | Mindful breathing lying down Mindful breathing sitting up Living with awareness |
| Being Mindful Is Simple, but It Is Not Easy! | Living with awareness isn't easy, so why are we doing this anyway? We give attention to the barriers to practice Understanding the importance of practice Bringing awareness to the breath and body | Living with awareness Mindful breathing Mindful eating |
| Who Am I? | Thoughts arise in the present but are often about the past or future Thoughts may not be accurate to the present reality Thoughts are not facts | Mindful breathing Mindfulness of the body Pleasant events |
| A Taste of Mindfulness | We have thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, but these are not who we are Thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are not exactly the same as the events they describe | 3-min breathing space Mindful yoga movements Tasting fruits |
| Music to Our Ears | Thoughts, feelings, and body sensations often color how we experience the world With our thoughts, we create individual and unique relationships and experiences Awareness holds it all | 3-min breathing space Mindfulness of the body Mindful listening |
| Sound Expressions | Practicing mindful awareness helps us recognize that thoughts, feelings, and body sensations influence how we express ourselves We can choose to express ourselves with mindful awareness | 3-min breathing space Mindful yoga movements Unpleasant sounds |
| Practice Looking | Judging is not the same as noting If we simply observe experiences rather than judge them, the experience may change We can choose to observe or note our experiences instead of judging them | 3-min breathing space Seeing the little details Stressful events |
| Strengthening the Muscle of Attention | Judging often changes how we experience the world Becoming more aware of judgments may change how we relate to thoughts and feelings Discovering "choice points" | 3-min breathing space Choosing to be aware Seeing five new things |
| Touching the World with Mindfulness | We have little control over most events that occur We do have choices in how we respond to events Choice points exist only in the present moment Bringing greater awareness to this moment, we may see more choice points | 3-min breathing space Mindfulness of the body Mindful touching |
| Touching the World with Mindfulness | We often react to events by moving toward things we like or judge as "good" and moving away from things we don't like or judge as "bad" Judging an experience may interfere with seeing clearly what is present in each moment We have choices in how we respond to events | 3-min breathing space Mindful yoga movements Mindful smelling |
| Life Is Not a Rehearsal | Mindfulness is available in everyday life We can practice mindful awareness using all our senses | 3-min breathing space Letter to myself |
| Living with Presence, Compassion, and Awareness | Mindful awareness can be helpful in our daily lives Bringing greater awareness to our lives is a personal choice Living with awareness requires commitment, compassion, and continued daily practice | Little gidding Living with presence, compassion, and awareness Letter from therapist to child Daily practice calendar Program evaluation questionnaire (optional) |

In this study, in order to select students with bullying behaviors and to compare students's scores in pretest and posttest, IBS was used. This scale was constructed by Espelage and Holt^[27] consists of 18 questions (items) that measure frequency of fighting, peer victimization, and bully behaviors. This questionnaire uses Likert scale from never (0) to 5 times or more (4). Cronbach's alpha method was used to determine

validity of this questionnaire. Alpha coefficient for total scale was 0.83 and was 0.87, 0.83, and 0.88 for each of bullying, fighting, and victimization subscales, respectively. This questionnaire was validated in Iran and validity coefficient using Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for total scale and was 0.77, 0.71, and 0.76 for bullying, victimization, and fighting subscales, respectively.^[3]

As sample group selection completed, MBCT-C package, which was developed by Semple and Lee^[26] was used to educate children. Mindfulness training is a program aims to help children increase their awareness of cognitions (thoughts), emotions (feelings), and body senses (the five senses) as separate entities. Children start language development through experimental activities and through which they describe nonjudgmentally their cognitions, emotions, and body senses.^[26] This issue is consistently supported during this program course. This program was administered within 12 sessions during each of which mindfulness basics were educated to children through the five senses. Eventually, after conducting the intervention in the form of a pretest and posttest design in both experimental and control groups, data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

RESULTS

Mean and standard deviation for bullying variable in experimental and control groups are reported in Table 2. Findings show that average bullying scores was decreased from pretest to posttest in experimental group ($d_{\text{Mean}} = 22/1$) but exhibit little difference in the control group.

In the following, mean scores in every item of bullying scale are presented separately. As seen in Table 3, the highest mean score in pretest for both groups belongs to question 9 "I was excluded or kept out of a group of friends on purpose." Findings indicate that while the experimental group showed highest decrease in this character, no significant difference was observed in the control group. Least mean scores in pretest for both groups belongs to question 6. Here, by comparing posttest scores for both groups, it can be found that mindfulness intervention was effective in reducing this character too.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of bullying variable by groups

| | Group | Mean | SD |
|----------|------------|------|------|
| Pretest | Experiment | 1.91 | 0.92 |
| | Control | 2.12 | 0.49 |
| Posttest | Experiment | 0.69 | 0.30 |
| | Control | 2.00 | 0.41 |

SD: Standard deviation

Table 3: Means of student scores in bullying scale questions

| Questions | Question | Experimental group | | Control group | |
|-----------|---|--------------------|----------|---------------|----------|
| | | Pretest | Posttest | Pretest | Posttest |
| 1 | I upset other students for the fun of it | 2.55 | 1.88 | 2.44 | 2.11 |
| 2 | In a group, I teased other students | 2.11 | 0.66 | 2.11 | 1.77 |
| 3 | I helped harass other students | 1.11 | 0.55 | 2.00 | 1.88 |
| 4 | I teased other students | 2.00 | 0.44 | 2.22 | 2.11 |
| 5 | I was mean to someone when I was angry | 2.77 | 1.66 | 2.66 | 3.44 |
| 6 | I spread rumors about other students | 1.11 | 0.11 | 1.22 | 0.88 |
| 7 | I started (instigated) arguments or conflicts | 2.22 | 0.77 | 2.33 | 2.00 |
| 8 | I encouraged people to fight | 2.00 | 0.77 | 1.66 | 1.44 |
| 9 | I excluded other students from my clique of friends | 3.00 | 0.66 | 3.11 | 2.33 |

It was hypothesized that mindfulness training reduces bullying behaviors among children. First, we checked the statistical assumptions. Results showed that interaction effect between pretest and group was not significant ($F_{1,16} = 99.16$, $P > 0.05$). Distribution of pretest ($z = -0.71$, $P > 0.05$) and posttest ($z = 0.71$, $P > 0.05$) scores was normal.

Results of ANCOVA showed that the effect of pretest scores on posttest scores was significant. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in bullying scores between experimental and control groups. Thus, research hypothesis was supported. In other words, mindfulness training reduces bullying behaviors [Table 4].

DISCUSSION

In the present study, effectiveness of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on bullying reduction among elementary students was investigated. Results showed that there is significant difference in bullying variable between experimental and control group. Hence, MBCT-C was effective in bullying behavior reduction among students. Findings of this study were consistent with Abid *et al.*^[21] who showed that there is significant between bullying and mindfulness as well as with Dameron^[20] and Gonynor^[24] who showed that mindfulness and self-compassion are correlated with each other. Theoretically, it can be explained that influencing emotions and behaviors arised by emotions are the most important aspect of mindfulness practices which is effective on bullying decrease. In fact, people perceive positive impacts of mindfulness and increase their autonomy and self-regulation toward emotions.^[28] However, if administered appropriately and regularly, mindfulness techniques can be a proactive way to target well-being among students.^[22] On the one hand, these practices by focusing children on the present moment and attention nonjudgmentally to their thoughts and feelings could increase people awareness of their positive emotions and thus helps to nurture these emotions which in turn contribute to arise behaviors with affection, compassion, and empathy. On the other hand, it works to break the cycle of automatic reactions during negative emotions which are followed by decreased aggressive and impulsive behaviors. Gonynor^[24] pointed out this and suggested that positive impacts of mindfulness are emotional regulation and awareness of the present moment.

Table 4: Summary of analysis of covariance of mindfulness training on bullying scores

| Source | SS | df | MS | F | P | η^2 |
|---------|-------|----|------|--------|------|----------|
| Pretest | 1.28 | 1 | 1.28 | 23.61 | 0.01 | 0.61 |
| Group | 6.64 | 1 | 6.64 | 122.58 | 0.01 | 0.89 |
| Error | 0.81 | 15 | 0.05 | - | - | - |
| Total | 42.39 | 18 | - | - | - | - |

SS: Sum of squares, MS: Mean of squares

Those students who receive mindfulness practices feel safe, relaxed, and less stressed and are less likely to exhibit bully behaviors because they experience inner strength and inner peace that ultimately contributes to interacting with peers in peaceful ways.^[24] Furthermore, mindfulness practices could make people more interested in observing strengths in others than weaknesses and consequently become less likely to exhibit bullying behaviors. Dameron^[20] showed that mindfulness practices work to break the cycle of automatic reaction and has been shown to increase awareness of others, and it aims to teach students how to pause and consider how their actions will affect other people. Hence, it can be said that their self-control is enhanced and spread out their inner awareness (consciousness).^[20]

Another feature of effectiveness of MBCT-C on bullying is that bully students usually exhibit bullying behaviors against those classmates who are somehow different and distinct, while nonjudgmental attitude is at the core of mindfulness. It seems that mindfulness is a skill which such students need when dealing with other classmates enhancing it may reduce behaviors such as improper humors and excluding people from a group of friends.^[29,30]

One limitation of the current research is time schedule of mindfulness training package. There are 12 sessions (90 min) which must be held on a weekly basis. Hence, it is recommended that in further studies, training packages with shorter duration are designed to facilitate implementation. Another limitation of the study is related to research design. In this study, conventional sampling was used, so the findings may not be generalizable to all children.

CONCLUSION

Given the above discussions, it can be concluded that MBCT-C could be effective in reducing aggression and bullying behaviors through affecting the level of awareness of emotions at the moments and increasing the ability of controlling it. Furthermore, these practices bring up positive emotions such as empathy, affection, and compassion in the light of which people's tendency toward exhibiting bullying behaviors would decrease. Hence, we found that the most important feature of mindfulness in bullying reduction is its effectiveness on emotions.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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