

Abstract

This project is an interdisciplinary research effort involving faculty from UF's College of Education's School Psychology and Special Education programs, and UF/IFAS College of Agriculture's Family, Youth, and Community Sciences department to advance a promising intervention to reduce relational aggression (RA) among middle school girls and prevent serious negative consequences associated with such behavior. Specifically, we will conduct a two-year, two-phase study to first strengthen the inter-rater agreement of our school professional student referral protocol with well-established peer nomination measures and then examine the social validity and implementation fidelity of our professional development and intervention protocols. The proposed project is informed by the investigators' previous research demonstrating positive treatment effects of the school-based *Growing Interpersonal Relationships Through Learning and Systemic Supports (GIRLSS)* intervention for middle school girls engaged in RA, and developmental trajectories of risk behaviors such as aggression to inform intervention designs and evaluation. Aggression and bullying behaviors such as RA have short and long-term detrimental impacts on both perpetrators and victims, such as substance abuse, risk-taking, depression, volatile romantic relationships, unstable employment and personality pathology. Preventing these serious negative outcomes has been recent funding priorities of both the National Institutes of Health (including the National Institute of Child and Human Development [NICHD], the National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], and the National Institute of Drug Abuse [NIDA]) and the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). We have designed both phases of the proposed study to result in refinements to the *GIRLSS* protocol and advanced preliminary data to be used in support of subsequent federal grant applications to conduct large scale research examining the impact of the full *GIRLSS* package, including student referral, intervention, and professional development protocols.

GIRLSS is an innovative and theoretically sound curriculum with promising pilot results, and desired by end users (e.g., school counselors) that makes it a competitive candidate for future funding. While several programs target bullying and aggression all are limited to children in middle childhood/elementary school and most are delivered school or classroom-wide as prevention efforts. Few, if any, target RA specifically. There is a substantial gap in strategies available to address RA in middle school, when longitudinal developmental research demonstrates such behaviors increase among approximately 18% of girls. Without intervention and behavior change, these behaviors are likely to continue and result in negative social, emotional, and health/mental health outcomes. School counselors describe a significant need for interventions targeting RA and cite group counseling, such as that employed by *GIRLSS*, as a recommended strategy.

In the proposed study, we aim to advance the student referral, professional development, and intervention protocols of *GIRLSS*. We will conduct the proposed studies within two middle schools with whom we have strong partnerships, including previous collaborative work (see Appendix A Letters of Support). We request funding to collect peer nomination, student self-report, and teacher-report of students' behavior in Year 1 to examine the inter-rater agreement of our school professional student referral protocol with the gold standard peer nomination measure. In Year 2, we request funding to implement our professional development and intervention protocol in the same partner study schools and, then, collect social validity and implementation fidelity data in the form of questionnaires completed by *GIRLSS* implementers (school counselors and GRAs) and student participants following each session, self-report implementation fidelity checklists, implementation fidelity observation protocol of videotaped sessions, and end of intervention focus groups with implementing school counselors. We will use our findings to refine and improve the student referral, professional development, and intervention protocols of *GIRLSS*, disseminate our findings at national conferences and peer-reviewed publications, and, most importantly, prepare future federal grant applications to NICHD, NIMH, NIDA and/or IES to conduct a randomized controlled field trial examining the impact of *GIRLSS* as an intervention to reduce RA.