

# **“I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . .”**

## **An Assessment of a Domestic Violence Education Program for Elementary Students**

Journal of Interpersonal Violence  
2014, Vol. 29(13) 2497–2508  
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DOI: 10.1177/0886260513518436  
[jiv.sagepub.com](http://jiv.sagepub.com)  


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### **Abstract**

School officials across the country have recognized that many of their students live in homes where domestic violence occurs. As a result, several elementary schools have implemented education-based programs focused on this issue. The current study evaluates the efficacy of the “I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . .” program that was presented to elementary school children in two school districts in the Midwest. This study examines the level of knowledge retention by students who participated in the “I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . .” program during the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years. Fourth- and fifth-grade students responded to open-ended questions regarding their understanding of domestic violence and their retention of the concepts presented in the “I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . .” curriculum. While the results suggest that students retain the information presented in the program, there also appears to be a gender difference in knowledge retention.

### **Keywords**

intervention/treatment, domestic violence, assessment, children exposed to domestic violence, anything related to domestic violence

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It is estimated that between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year in the United States (Carter, Weithorn, & Behrman, 1999). Research has revealed that people who are exposed to domestic violence as children are more likely to become abusers and victims of domestic violence when they become adults (Hotaling, Straus, & Lincoln, 1989; Widom, 1992). In an effort to prevent future abuse and victimization, some elementary schools in the United States now use education-based programs to teach children what to do if they witness or become victims of domestic violence.

While some consider children in elementary school too young to be exposed to the problem of domestic violence, others argue that it is important to reach children before they become involved in their own relationships during middle school and high school (Ehrensaft et al., 2003). According to Hamby (2006), rates of violence during this age are two to three times higher than violence among adults. This suggests that providing domestic violence education to children *before* they reach middle and high school may increase their awareness of this issue and reduce the chances that they will use violence or become victims of violence during later stages of their lives.

School-based domestic violence programs are important as this may be the only source of information on this topic available to children. But do children remember the information that is presented to them in school-based domestic violence programs after the programs are over? The study featured in this article examines the level of knowledge retention of elementary school children who participated in the domestic violence education program, "I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . ." In addition, this study explores the influence of student race, gender, and living arrangements on knowledge retention of the program and its core lessons.

## **Efficacy of School-Based Domestic Violence Programs**

The goal of school-based domestic violence programs is to interrupt the cycle of violence by educating children about domestic violence and assisting children who may already be experiencing violence in their homes. Only a few school-based programs that include the topic of domestic violence have been evaluated in the last several decades (see Table 1).

In 1988, "My Family and Me: Violence Free" was created by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women. The goals of this program include teaching students to label and define different forms of violence in families, establish a safety plan for violent and abusive emergency domestic situations, and teach students assertive skills aimed at problem solving without using

**Table I.** Evaluations of Violence/Domestic Violence Education Programs.

Program	Grades	Intensity	Results
My Family and Me	Elementary	Two 50-min sessions for 6 weeks	Increased student knowledge and awareness. No change in student attitudes toward violence (Gamache & Snapp, 1995).
A.S.A.P.	Elementary, middle, and high school	65 lessons in six topics on violence prevention	Increased student knowledge and awareness. Positive changes in student attitudes toward violence (Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992).
Expect Respect	Elementary	12-week curriculum	Increased student knowledge and awareness (Sanchez et al., 2001).

Note. A.S.A.P. = A School-Based Anti-Violence Program.

violence (O'Brien, 2001). An evaluation of this program found that students increased their knowledge of violence; however, there was no change in their attitudes toward violence (Gamache & Snapp, 1995). This study did not specifically examine student characteristics.

The London, Ontario (Canada) Family Court Clinic developed "A School-Based Anti-Violence Program" (A.S.A.P.), which focuses on violence prevention (Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). A portion of the A.S.A.P. program focused on domestic and dating violence was assessed using pre-tests, immediate post-tests, and another follow-up test 6 weeks later. Results of the evaluation found that students made significant gains in their attitudes, knowledge, and behavioral intentions from the pre-test to the post-test, and were able to retain this information 6 weeks after participating in the program (Jaffe et al., 1992). Both male and female students increased their overall awareness of violence in intimate relationships and family violence; however, female students reported attitudes less accepting of domestic violence than male students both before and after participating in the program (Jaffe et al., 1992). Student race was not examined in this evaluation.

In the late 1980s, the "Expect Respect" program was created in Austin, Texas, to provide information on violence (dating, domestic, bullying) and sexual harassment to elementary students. The goal of this program is to prepare children for safe and healthy future relationships that do not include violence (Sanchez et al., 2001). Sanchez et al. (2001) evaluated this program using a pre-test-post-test design with six elementary schools receiving the intervention curriculum and six control schools that did not. The evaluation revealed an improvement in scores related to awareness and knowledge of

sexual harassment, while there was less improvement in knowledge about violence. Despite a lack of improvement in knowledge of violence, some students reported that they would be more likely to intervene if they witnessed acts of violence in the future. Both boys and girls showed positive changes in their attitudes, although girls scored higher than boys both before and after the training.

Results from the evaluations of the domestic violence education programs in Table 1 suggest that this type of program can increase student awareness of domestic violence, and in some cases, may change students' attitudes toward violence (Jaffé et al., 1992). Gender differences were noted for both the A.S.A.P. and Expect Respect programs; specifically, that girls had more positive changes in their attitudes, but both boys and girls showed improvement overall after the training programs. Student race was not examined in any of the evaluations.

Additional research is needed to better understand the impact of school-based domestic violence programs on children. The study presented in this article contributes to this limited body of research by evaluating student knowledge retention of the school-based domestic violence program, "I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . . ."

## **The "I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . . ." Program**

In 1990, the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center of Fargo-Moorhead created the "I Wish the Hitting Would Stop . . . . " program ("I Wish" hereafter). This program is designed to help elementary students identify acts of violence and domestic violence (including physical violence and verbal abuse) and to teach students what to do if they witness violence in their homes. This program teaches children to report acts of violence that they may encounter to a trusted adult, and that it is never okay to keep violence a secret. The curriculum is designed for children who may or may not be experiencing domestic violence at home.

An instructor from the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center presents the "I Wish" program material to students in a classroom setting in two 45-min sessions. Instructors use a 13.5-min video and a 29-page workbook to help children learn the main concepts of the program. The workbook contains both written descriptions and pictures of acts of violence to generate discussion and questions from students.

The "I Wish" program has been presented in elementary schools in Eastern North Dakota for over two decades, but has not been studied until now. The current study answers the following research questions: Is student knowledge

retention of the “I Wish” program and its core lessons influenced by the amount of time that passes since participation in the program? Do student characteristics influence knowledge retention of the “I Wish” program and its core lessons?

## **Method**

Survey data were collected from eight elementary schools in two school districts in Eastern North Dakota. The community within the first district consists of 2,329 residents, most of whom are White (97.3%) and the median household income is \$51,250 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The elementary school in the first district houses kindergarten through fifth-grade (339 students total; Public School Review, 2012). The community within the second school district consists of 25,830 residents, most of whom are White (93.5%), and the median household income is \$61,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The seven elementary schools in the second district consist of 2,540 students (Elementary Schools.org, 2012).

All fourth- and fifth-grade students in both school districts have participated in the “I Wish” program every year for the last two decades. Surveys were distributed to fourth- and fifth-grade classes in all of the elementary schools in both school districts (18 classrooms) between November 2011 and April 2012. Each of the questions on the survey required the students to write out their own response without any structured options provided. Fourth graders completed the program 3 months prior to completing the survey, while fifth graders had completed the program 1 year earlier. The response rate was 74% (314/427). Most of the students who completed surveys were White (94%) and lived with both parents at home (81%). There were more girls (53.2%) in the sample than boys (46.8%), and more fourth graders (57.3%) than fifth graders (42.7%).

The survey instrument contained questions inquiring about student demographic information and questions based on the “I Wish” program curriculum. The survey was reviewed by an elementary school teacher to ensure that questions were cognitively appropriate for children in fourth and fifth grade. An “I Wish” program instructor also reviewed the survey to verify that the questions represent the goals and core lessons from the program.

## ***Dependent Variables***

To measure general recollection of the program, the survey contains the question, “Do you remember the ‘I Wish the Hitting Would Stop’ program from the fourth grade?” (no = 0; yes = 1). The survey also contained questions that

measured student knowledge of the core lessons from the “I Wish” program including: “What does the word violence mean?” (physical violence = 0; both physical and verbal violence = 1; and responses that did not fit into the first two categories were coded as missing); “What is domestic violence?” (all other answers = 0; violence involving family/relatives = 1); “When should children keep secrets about violence?” (all other answers = 0; never keep violence a secret = 1); and “What should you do if you tell someone about violence but they do not listen to you?” (all other answers = 0; keep telling someone until they listen to you = 1).

### *Independent Variables*

Student grade (0 = fourth grade; 1 = fifth grade) was used to measure short term (3 months) and long-term (1 year) knowledge retention. To examine the influence of student characteristics on knowledge retention of the “I Wish” program and core lessons, student gender was coded 0 = girl, 1 = boy; student race was coded 0 = White, 1 = all other races; and student living arrangement was coded 0 = both parents living in household, 1 = all other living arrangements.

## **Findings**

The first research question asks as follows:

**Research Question 1:** Is student knowledge retention of the “I Wish” program and its core lessons influenced by the amount of time that has passed since participation in the program?

Overall, most (83%) students remembered the “I Wish” program. More fourth graders were able to recall the program and all core lessons compared with fifth-grade students (see Table 2). A statistically significant relationship was revealed between student grade and remembering the “I Wish” program and three of four core lessons.

The second research question asks as follows:

**Research Question 2:** Do student characteristics influence knowledge retention of the “I Wish” program and its core lessons?

Student race did not have a statistically significant relationship with student knowledge retention of the program or its core lessons. Student living arrangement only had a statistically significant relationship with knowing

**Table 2.** Knowledge Retention of the “I Wish” Program/Core Lessons and Student Grade.

Dependent variable	Fourth grade (%)	Fifth grade (%)	$\chi^2$
Remember the program	95	67	$\chi^2 = 41.70, p < .05^*$
Physical violence and verbal abuse	35	29	$\chi^2 = 1.675, p = .196$
Define domestic violence	71	51	$\chi^2 = 12.807, p < .05^*$
Never keep secrets about violence	85	71	$\chi^2 = 0.057, p < .05^*$
Keep telling until someone listens	88	78	$\chi^2 = 4.316, p < .05^*$

\*Significant at .05.

**Table 3.** Knowledge Retention of the “I Wish” Program/Core Lessons.

Dependent Variable	Female (%)	Male (%)	$\chi^2$
Remember the program	89	76	$\chi^2 = 9.061, p < .05^*$
Physical violence and verbal abuse	57	39	$\chi^2 = 13.126, p < .05^*$
Define domestic violence	64	60	$\chi^2 = 0.588, p = .443$
Never keep secrets about violence	84	73	$\chi^2 = 5.723, p < .05^*$
Keep telling until someone listens	88	78	$\chi^2 = 7.054, p < .05^*$

\*Significant at .05.

that violence consists of both physical and verbal components ( $\chi^2 = 4.391, p < .05$ ). Students who lived with both parents in the household were more likely to define violence with both a physical and verbal component.

The only student characteristic that was consistently found to have a statistically significant relationship with knowledge retention of the “I Wish” program, both in general and with most of its core lessons is gender (see Table 3). Most girls (89%) remembered the “I Wish” program compared with 76% of the boys. A higher percentage of boys (57%) identified violence as a physical act only and did not mention verbal abuse compared with girls (39%). In addition, a higher percentage of boys (27%) reported that they would keep violence a secret compared with girls (16%). More girls (88%) reported that they would keep telling an adult about incidents of violence

until someone listened compared with 78% of the boys. There was no relationship between student gender and being able to correctly define domestic violence.

## **Discussion**

Statistical analyses used in this study revealed that the passing of time (student grade) influenced student knowledge retention of the "I Wish" program and its core lessons. Nearly all (95%) fourth graders remembered the program compared with 67% of fifth graders. This is evidence of some short-term (3 months) and long-term (1 year) knowledge retention. The issue of knowledge retention is a concern for any educational program, but it is particularly important for programs that are intended to educate children about domestic violence with the hope that they will not become abusers or victims of domestic violence later on in their adult lives. One study found that knowledge from violence prevention education programs can decrease in as little as 2 years after participating in such programs (Foshee et al., 2004).

This study also examined the relationship between student characteristics and knowledge retention of the "I Wish" program and its core lessons. Student living arrangement was only significant in students understanding that violence consists of a physical component and verbal abuse, while student race was not statistically significant in any of the analyses (this could be the result of a small sample of students from all races other than White).

Student gender was significant to students remembering the "I Wish" program and all but one of its core lessons. There was no gender difference in survey responses regarding the definition of domestic violence. It is likely that some students (38%) erred in their definition of domestic violence because they are unfamiliar with the word "domestic" as it may not be commonly used by elementary school children. In addition, the "I Wish" program workbook does not specifically define this word; instead, it presents examples of conflict and violence between family members.

A difference in knowledge retention of three out of four of the core lessons of the "I Wish" program was found among boys and girls. For example, more boys defined violence as physical acts only (without mentioning anything about verbal abuse) when compared with girls. These findings are not surprising if we consider traditional gender roles for males. Boys are often socialized to believe that aggressive, physical behavior is just part of the male experience (Milkie, 1994). Encouragement to verbally express thoughts and feelings is typically not part of the traditional male gender role socialization process (O'Neil, 1981).

In addition, when compared with girls, fewer boys reported that they would keep telling an adult about incidents of violence until someone listened to them, and that it is never ok to keep violence a secret. Another part of the traditional male gender role is that males are supposed to be self-reliant and do not need to seek out help from others (McCarthy & Holliday, 2004). This message is one that is expressed to boys at an early age and is reinforced over the course of their lives (Pederson & Vogel, 2007). Stoltz (2005) argues that boys and girls respond differently to violence prevention programming, and that the origin of these differences lies in the socialization of masculinity.

## **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, this study found that several students could remember the program and most of its lessons for up to 1 year after participation in the program; however, there is no way to know if the students actually use or apply the skills they learn from the program. The cross-sectional design of this study does not allow us to determine whether students apply skills from the program at a later time (only longitudinal data would allow for this determination). Second, the sample used in this study represents schools in only one state and lacks variation in student race; thus, the findings from this study may not be generalizable to schools in other states that have more racially diverse student populations. Finally, because this evaluation is nonexperimental, it lacks a control group of students not in the program to use for comparison. Additional research is needed on this topic to better understand the impact of these programs.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Despite any limitations of this study, the findings are important as they suggest that some children can retain information presented to them in domestic violence prevention programs. To ensure an educational program of this nature is successful, Foshee and colleagues (2004) suggest booster sessions would assist students in maintaining their knowledge of domestic violence prevention. Booster sessions are brief reviews of previously learned program material at several points in time after participating in the program. These short sessions are not as detailed or in-depth as the original program; instead, they provide a brief overview of the main concepts from the program. Booster sessions must contain updated, age-appropriate material to have an impact (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003). It is possible that students who participate in the “I

Wish" program could benefit from the use of booster sessions during both middle school and high school.

A second recommendation is that the "I Wish" program workbook would benefit from some revision to address the issue of students not adequately understanding the concept of the word "domestic." The workbook revision should include an age-appropriate definition that coincides with the illustrations in the workbook.

Finally, due to the differences experienced during gender socialization for boys and girls, some have argued that it may be worthwhile to customize the presentation of violence prevention programs for boys and girls (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004). The "I Wish" program and similar domestic violence curriculum could also benefit from this type of gender customization.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The initial study was partially funded by the Fargo-Moorhead Rape and Abuse Crisis Center.

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