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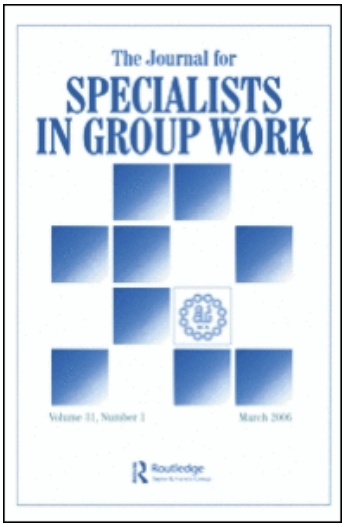

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Solving Problems Together: A Psychoeducational Group Model for Victims of Bullies

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PRACTICE

Solving Problems Together: A Psychoeducational Group Model for Victims of Bullies

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Schools play a vital role in decreasing the occurrence of bullying among children. Victims of bullying behavior need guidance in developing the skills and strategies needed to effectively respond to bullying. Through small group work, the school counselor can help students develop the knowledge, attitude, and skills that will enable them to deal more effectively with bullying. This article describes an innovative psychoeducational group model, Solving Problems Together (SPT), which not only engages students in the discovery of knowledge and skills needed to deal effectively with bullying, but also demonstrates techniques for solving predicaments in the future.

Keywords: *bullies; problem-solving; school counseling; victims*

Bullying has become a primary concern for many schools throughout the nation. A national study found that 29.9 percent of students are involved in bullying, either as bullies, victims, or both (Nansel et al., 2001). According to the 2003 National Center for Education Statistics report on school violence, the percentage of students being victimized by bullying has increased. In 2001, 8 percent of students reported that they had been bullied at school in the last six months, up from 5 percent in 1999. An estimated 1.7 million children in the United States, grades 6 through 10, can be identified as bullies (Nansel et al.), and almost one-third of public schools have reported daily to weekly occurrences of student bullying (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Schools across the world are now making an intense effort to reduce bullying among students. Numerous anti-bullying programs have been developed and implemented in schools; however, these have only been moderately successful. According to Rigby (2002), anti-bullying

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programs may not produce the intended results. Reductions in bullying have been relatively small and tended to be related more to reducing the proportion of children being victimized than the proportion engaged in bullying. Interventions that Rigby did consider to be successful have not shown that all types (physical, verbal, relational) of bullying were necessarily reduced.

Research shows that bullying can have lasting adverse effects on children. Student absenteeism (Reid, 1989; Rigby, 1996), social isolation (Slee & Rigby, 1993), poor academic achievement (Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996), and internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor psychosocial adjustment (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Craig, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000) have all been correlated with victimization due to bullying. Longitudinal research suggests that many of the negative effects associated with childhood victimization continue into adulthood (Olweus, 1992, 1993; Rigby, 1996, 1998).

Schools play a vital role in decreasing the occurrence of bullying among children. While some anti-bullying programs have minimally decreased the occurrence of bullying, students are still being victimized. These students need guidance in developing the skills and strategies needed to effectively respond to bullying. Through small group counseling, the school counselor can help students develop the knowledge, attitude, and skills that will enable them to deal more effectively with bullying. This article describes an innovative psychoeducational group counseling model, Solving Problems Together (SPT), which not only engages students in the discovery of knowledge and skills needed to deal effectively with bullying, but also demonstrates techniques for solving predicaments in the future.

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SPT OVERVIEW

Solving Problems Together (SPT) provides students with the opportunity to increase critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while simultaneously working toward a solution for their presented problem. In the SPT model, students work collaboratively to uncover solutions to a common problem and practice skills that are discovered through independent research (Hall, 2004).

Foundation of SPT

Adapted from the teaching philosophy of problem-based learning (Barrows, 2000; Neufeld & Barrows, 1974; Schmidt, 1993), SPT

encourages students to work collaboratively to uncover solutions to problems. Rooted in John Dewey's philosophy that all thinking begins with a problem and that contextually solving authentic problems promotes creative thinking (Dewey, 1916, 1933), this model encourages students to analyze information that is presented in a problem scenario, acquire new knowledge, and then apply that knowledge to the real world (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Bruner, 1990; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Schunk, 2000).

Problem-based learning (PBL) is premised upon the idea that students work in small groups, individually research specific issues relevant to the identified problem, reconvene after a period of independent research, and then collaboratively discuss their research findings. The model requires students to actively discuss and analyze problems, form hypotheses, and create personal learning issues (Mennin & Majoor, 2002; Wood, 2003). Learners actively construct their own learning issues through social and educational experiences that are influenced by personal experiences (Jarvis, Hofford, & Griffin, 1998).

According to Barrows (2000), the goals of PBL include the attainment of an extensive, integrated knowledge base that is easily recalled and applied to the analysis and solution of problems and the development of effective problem-solving skills, self-directed learning skills, and team skills. Studies indicate that students in PBL are more satisfied, less stressed, and more encouraged than students in traditional didactic educational programs. Studies also indicate increased knowledge retention and greater comprehension through the utilization of a variety of resources (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Milbury, 1997; Vernon & Blake, 1993). Studies in K–12 environments have revealed that students demonstrate greater insight into content material (Barron et al., 1998; Gallagher & Stepien, 1995; Steward & Rudolph, 2001) and produce higher quality projects than students in a traditional educational environment.

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ADVANTAGES OF THE SPT MODEL

The SPT model empowers students to take charge of their problems. Students learn critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and transference skills (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Barron et al., 1998; Barrows, 2000; Mennin, Gordan, Majoor, & Osman, 2003; Mergendoller, Bellisimo, & Maxwell, 2000; Schmidt, 1993; Vernon & Blake, 1993; Wood, 2003). The process forces students to analyze their own situations and then locate resources for help. SPT also teaches them the problem-solving process step-by-step and enables them to apply new knowledge to similar situations in the future.

APPLICATION FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

With such a strong emphasis on standardized testing, school counselors are beginning to experience restrictions on times that students are available for counseling, as well as pressure to provide documentation of the effectiveness of counseling interventions. The structure and goals of problem-based learning (PBL) suit the academic mission of schools and have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing test scores (Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001). Since PBL focuses on using educational methods to acquire information (researching skills) and develop related meaning and skills, the counselor can adapt the PBL process to psychoeducational group work. School counselors can empower students to solve their own problems and teach them problem-solving skills simultaneously.

Group sessions are structured according to an adapted problem-based learning model: data identification, questions, hypotheses, key questions, and resources (Hall, 2004). Students review a problem statement presented by the counselor and identify facts from the statement. Students devise a list of open-ended questions surrounding each fact and then discuss possible answers (hypotheses) for each of the questions. Key questions that must be answered in order to solve the problem are identified, and possible resources are listed. Students then research each of the key questions using identified resources. Once information is found, each question is discussed during group counseling, and skills discovered through the research are practiced. The process repeats itself until all key questions are answered and the problem has been resolved.

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THE SPT MODEL WITH VICTIMS OF BULLIES

The SPT model can be used with a number of group topics. It has been used successfully with students in kindergarten through high school and on topics ranging from anger management to friendship skills. This article, however, will focus on the counselor's use of SPT with a group of five seventh-grade students who were identified as victims of bullies.

Designing the Group

Planning for SPT is critical to the success of the group. According to Gladding (2003), an effective psychoeducational group leader should take preventive steps before the group's first session, including planning for session length, session frequency, number of sessions, and

what will occur within sessions. The leader should also carefully design the group. Furr (2000) advocates a six-step process for group design: (1) state the purpose, (2) establish goals, (3) set objectives, (4) select content, (5) design experiential activities, and (6) evaluate the group.

Purpose. The purpose of the group was to allow students who were identified as victims of bullying behavior to develop effective strategies for responding to this behavior.

Goals. According to the Association for Specialists in Group Work (1991, 2000), psychoeducational groups stress growth through knowledge with activities typically presented in the form of nonthreatening exercises or group discussions (Bates, Johnson, & Blaker, 1982). The goal of the SPT group was for students to go through the PBL problem-solving process to determine strategies that could be used when faced with bullying behavior. This problem-solving process provided students a nonthreatening environment for discussing their experiences.

Setting objectives. Developing specific, measurable objectives was key to the success of the SPT group. The objectives for the group were identified as (a) students will identify, apply, and practice three to four effective responses to name calling; and (b) students will identify, apply, and practice three to four effective responses to physical aggression.

Selecting content and activities. In order to compose a successful problem statement, it was essential to consider objectives for the group, evaluation methods for the group, and a realistic problem scenario that related to students. The problem statement was developed by using a real-world scenario and incorporating items from the objectives. The counselor developed the following problem statement:

> John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school. Some students call him names, while others push and shove him. He's tired of being a victim of bullies.

After the problem statement was written, the counselor went through the SPT model to anticipate students' questions and hypotheses. These replies were anticipated to ensure that confusing or unnecessary information was removed from the problem statement and that questions posed would lead students to the objectives.

The counselor then devised an anticipated schedule of events for eight counseling sessions. Session 1: The pretest will be administered. Students will introduce themselves and go over group rules. Students will review the problem statement and identify facts. If time allows, students will begin asking questions for each fact. Session 2: Students

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will review the problem statement and facts listed during the previous session. Students will identify open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) for each fact and begin forming hypotheses. Session 3: Students will review problem statement, facts, and questions. Students will continue to form hypotheses for each question. Session 4: Students will review the case, including facts, questions, and previous hypotheses. Students will determine at least two key questions that they want to research and answer. Students will identify resources to help them answer these key questions. Students will utilize resources to answer one key question as homework. Session 5: Students will discuss findings with group. Students will practice skills that were identified in the resources. Students will research the second key question as homework. Session 6: Students will again discuss new findings with group. Students will practice skills that were identified in the resources. Students will further research key questions as homework. Session 7: Students will discuss any new findings with group and practice skills. Session 8: Students will practice skills and discuss how they will continue to use these skills. The posttest will be administered.

Evaluating. Evaluation of the group involved the use of a pretest/posttest design. At the beginning of the first session and the end of the last session, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked the following:

1. Think of the last time that someone called you a name. What was your response? How was your behavior? What did you say?
2. Think of the last time someone pushed you, shoved you, or hit you. What was your response? How was your behavior? What did you say or do?

The counselor then evaluated whether or not the student's response was submissive, assertive, or aggressive. The number of assertive responses was then calculated. Differences in pretest and posttest numbers were then compared to determine the effectiveness of the group. The counselor also conducted informal interviews with several teachers of participating students, although not all teachers were contacted.

Selecting members. Students participating in the SPT group were identified through the completion of a schoolwide survey (see Appendix A) concerning bullying behavior. Students who indicated persistent victimization by peers (answered "yes" to 3 or more questions) were identified as potential members for the group. The counselor then met with each of these students individually to determine interest and fit, and parent letters were sent home to obtain permission. This article will describe the implementation of SPT with one of these groups, which included five seventh-grade students. Participants included 3 females and 2 males, all African American.

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Conducting the Group

Beginning the group. During the first group session, the counselor reiterated the group's purpose and goals of developing strategies for victims of bullies. Students then introduced themselves and answered the question, "Have you ever experienced or seen someone else being bullied?" The prevalence of bullying within the school environment was discussed by group members. Students then completed the pretest, and group rules were developed and written on a sheet of bulletin board paper. The counselor then discussed the structure of the group: "The group will meet once a week for about 45 minutes for 8 weeks. During our time together, we will be using a problem-solving process to help us develop strategies for victims of bullies. The first step in solving our problem will be to narrow our problem down to a manageable size." The counselor then read the problem statement (which had been previously written on bulletin board paper) to the group: "John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school. Some students call him names, while others push and shove him. He's tired of being a victim of bullies." The counselor asked the group if a similar situation had ever happened to them. Students were allowed to briefly share personal experiences with bullying behavior. The counselor then told the students that in order to help the student in the problem statement as well as each other in dealing with bullies, the group was going to use a problem-solving process that would help them solve this problem as well as any future problems that they may have. The counselor then explained that after first narrowing a problem down, the next step in the problem-solving process was to identify facts from the problem statement. Students identified and listed the following facts:

Facts:
1. John is frustrated and sad because students tease him at school.
2. Some students call him names.
3. Some students push and shove him.
4. He's tired of being a victim of bullies.

The session ended with a summary of the purpose and structure of the group and the accomplishments of the first session.

Helping the group to transition. The second session began with a brief review of the previous session. A student read the problem statement, while another student read the facts that had been previously recorded. The counselor then reminded the students about the problem-solving process, which included the first step as narrowing the problem, the second step as identifying facts, and now the third step as questioning. After identifying facts in the problem

statement, students asked open-ended questions about each of the facts. The words "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how" were written to encourage students to ask open-ended questions. Students identified the following questions for each fact that was listed previously:

Questions (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How):

Fact 1. Why do students tease John?

Fact 2. a. Why do students call him names?
b. What names do students call him?
c. Where is he when students call him names?
d. When do students call him names?
e. What can John do when they call him names?

Fact 3. a. Why do students push/shove him?
b. When do students push/shove him?
c. What can John do when they push/shove him?
d. Where are the teachers when they push/shove him?

Fact 4. a. What can he do to not be a victim of bullies?
b. Why is he a victim of bullies?

The session ended with a student summarizing what had been accomplished during this session and the previous session.

The third session focused on the fourth step in the problem-solving process, forming hypotheses. Each question was reviewed and students were asked to develop two to three hypotheses for each one. Students were instructed by the counselor to consider their own experiences with bullying when developing hypotheses. During this time, the counselor utilized the counseling skills of paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and summarizing (Rogers, 1951) to make it easier for students to share their own experiences with bullying. Students formed the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses:
1. He's smaller than them, he's smarter, he's nice
2a. They don't like him, they are jealous, they are mean
2b. Goober, nerd, cry baby
2c. Outside, hallway, cafeteria
2d. Changing classes, lunch time, recess/break
2e. Yell at them, ignore them, tell the teacher
3a. They are mean
3b. When the teacher is not there
3c. Ignore them, tell the teacher, push/shove back
3d. Not around, not paying attention
4a. Tell the teacher, tell his parents, tell the principal
4b. They are mean and he is nice

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The session ended with students answering the question, "Based on our discussion today while forming hypotheses, what do you have in common with someone else in the group?"

The fourth session focused on the identification of key questions and the location of resources, the fifth and sixth steps in the problem-solving process. The counselor asked the group members to review the problem statement again and look over the list of questions and hypotheses. The counselor asked, "Of all of these questions, which of these do we need to answer in order to solve the problem?" Students identified one main question, but with the help of the counselor broke this question down into two parts. These questions were written and then prioritized in order of importance to the group members.

Key Questions:
What can John do to avoid being a victim of the bullies?
1. What can John do when others call him names?
2. What can John do when others push/shove him?

The counselor then asked the group members to develop a list of resources for answering the above questions. Students were encouraged to identify multiple resources, including people as well as written material. Some of the resources that students identified included teacher, counselor, principal, parents, books, internet, youth leader, friends, and coach.

Group members were then assigned homework: to answer the first key question using resources that were previously listed. To help students with locating print material, the counselor provided multiple books on the topic of bullying along with printouts from the Internet (see Appendix B). Students were instructed to choose at least one book or printout to read and to interview at least one person. Using these resources, students researched the question, "What can John do when others call him names?"

Working in the group. At the beginning of the fifth session, students reviewed the problem statement and then discussed answers to the first key question. Students discovered the following strategies through reading and interviews: tell them to stop, tell an adult in the school (teacher, principal, counselor, etc.), tell friends to help you with the bully; take deep breaths to calm down, use "I" statements, etc. Since role play has been identified as an effective tool for helping students to practice a particular behavior and then see the consequences of that behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 2000), students then practiced the skills identified through research through role-play. For example, in several of the books the main character responded assertively when he or she was being called names.

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Therefore, students practiced responding assertively through role-play by mimicking the characters in the books.

After practicing identified strategies, students then focused on the second key question, "What can John do when others push/shove shove him?" Again, students were instructed to take home at least one book or printout and interview at least one person regarding the key question.

During the sixth counseling session, students shared their findings for the second key question and practiced skills discovered in the readings or through interviews. Students again role-played strategies for responding to someone who is physically aggressive. Students were assigned to continue to research the two key questions and to practice the strategies discovered during the week. The seventh counseling session focused on allowing students time to practice strategies and to provide comments and suggestions from using the skills during the previous week.

Terminating the group. While students were continuously reminded of the number of sessions that were left at the end of each counseling session, the final session was spent entirely on ending the group. Students developed a final list of strategies for responding to name calling and physical aggression. They reflected on their experiences within the group, on what they had learned, and how it felt to be a member of the group. The group also discussed what strategies they would use in the future and how they would continue to support each other. The counselor then asked each of the students to summarize his or her experience with the group, and then gave them the posttest.

SPT GROUP PROCESS

Students were very anxious when the group first began, but by taking the focus off of the individual group members and focusing instead on the problems of victims of bullies in general, the counselor lessened student anxiety and promoted participation of all group members. Students felt more comfortable at this stage, focusing on John and his problem with bullies rather than having to focus on their own problems. During the second and third session, the counselor noticed some behavior typical of the storming stage of group counseling. A few members competed with each other to ask questions before the other and tried to monopolize the group. To combat this issue, the counselor began calling students by name to develop questions and form hypotheses. When other students interrupted, they were referred back to the group rules that they had developed. The counselor also encouraged all members to participate by direct questioning

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and asking specifically for participation from quieter members. After persistent encouragement of the counselor, the quieter members began actively participating and asserting themselves rather than allowing the two other members to monopolize. During the third session, which focused on forming hypotheses, group members began discussing similar experiences and identifying with each other. The group began to develop cohesiveness. The group members actively began working together during the fourth session, which focused on the identification of key questions. A feeling of belongingness developed, and students supported each other. After answering the first key question and practicing skills through role play, students openly communicated and provided feedback to each other. During this stage in the group, the counselor served more as a facilitator, encouraging students to help each other with new skills. The closing session contained mixed emotions from the group members, which is typical. Students were excited about the new skills they had learned but also expressed some anxiety about not having the group for support. The counselor encouraged the members to continue to support each other when they saw each other in the school environment. Students also exchanged phone numbers to maintain contact. The process of the SPT group was similar to any psychoeducational group, with students beginning with uneasiness, becoming actively involved, and then becoming apprehensive about leaving the group.

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SPT GROUP OUTCOMES

Throughout the SPT group, members appeared to be intrinsically motivated. Surprisingly, students not only completed all outside assignments, but they went above and beyond the expectations of the assignment. Students took home three to four books/printouts and interviewed multiple adults. When asked about their efforts, students responded that they had experienced similar problems to the problem statement. The problem was real for them, and they wanted to know the answers in order to help themselves. Group members expressed excitement about what they had learned and encouraged other students to try new skills that were discovered in the readings or through interviews. Throughout the SPT group, the counselor merely acted as a facilitator by questioning, encouraging, and serving as a resource for students. Students, on their own, learned new skills for responding to bullies, and they felt empowered by their own discoveries.

At the conclusion of the SPT group, the counselor analyzed the pretest and posttest data collected. The pretest/posttest instructed

students to list their reactions/behaviors when someone had called them names or were physically aggressive toward them. Initially students provided responses such as "hit the student, told the teacher, told a friend, yelled at the student, and ignored the student." During the last group counseling session, students were again asked to list their responses to the same scenario during the past month. Students listed "said 'leave me alone,' said 'I don't care what you think' and walked away, took deep breaths and said 'it doesn't matter what you think about me,' stood my ground, and used an 'I' statement." These responses were considered to be more positive reactions to bullying behavior when compared to the initial responses. All students listed more positive reactions to bullying behavior when compared to responses before group counseling. These results indicated that students gained knowledge and increased their understanding in responding to bullying. In addition, the counselor also discovered that teachers noticed a difference in student behavior as well. In an informal interview, teachers indicated that they had observed students responding more assertively to bullies and fitting in more with their peers. However, it is difficult to determine if the change in student behavior was due to the SPT counseling intervention or the result of simply meeting with others who experienced similar problems. This finding, though, did suggest to the counselor that students not only gained knowledge in appropriate responses to bullying behavior, but that they also applied those skills to the school environment.

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Limitations

The pre/posttest for this study was very general, asking students to describe their reaction to only one incident in the past. Students' responses may have varied from incident to incident, which was not taken into consideration. Teachers also knew that the goals for the group sessions included increasing assertiveness skills and effectively responding to bullying behavior. This may have influenced their opinions of student behaviors and made them more apt to see differences in students' behaviors.

Generalization to other groups is also cautioned. To determine if a particular treatment is effective in changing behaviors, counselors must rely on replications across groups if such results are to be found worthy of generalization. Therefore, additional broader studies are needed to determine if the SPT model is truly effective for increasing assertiveness skills among victims of bullies. Further studies also need to examine the use of the SPT model with different psychoeducational group topics, such as anger management, social skills development, grief and loss, etc.

CONCLUSION

Schools play a vital role in decreasing the occurrence of bullying among children. Victims of bullying behavior need guidance in developing the skills and strategies needed to effectively respond to bullying. Through small group counseling, the school counselor can help students develop the knowledge, attitude, and skills that will enable students to deal more effectively with bullying. The examination of SPT in group counseling in a school setting offers great promise in teaching students skills that are needed, while simultaneously helping them develop problem-solving skills. By following the six step problem-solving process, students become engaged in the discovery of knowledge and skills and learn techniques for solving future problems. However, more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this particular intervention versus traditional group counseling.

Many school counselors utilize group counseling as an efficient tool for influencing the school environment. The SPT model can make that process even more efficient by teaching problem-solving and critical thinking skills while simultaneously working on a specified problem. Based on the methods of problem-based learning, SPT not only promotes the academic, career, and personal/social development of students, but also reinforces the academic mission of schools.

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APPENDIX A

Bullying Survey

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your name?_____		
2. Who is your homeroom teacher?_____		
3. Does anyone ever pick on you?	Yes	No
4. Does anyone call you names?	Yes	No
5. Does anyone push you around?	Yes	No
6. Does anyone tease you?	Yes	No
7. Does anyone spread rumors about you?	Yes	No
8. Does anyone make fun of you or your parents?	Yes	No
9. Does anyone try to start fights with you?	Yes	No
10. Do you feel like you don't belong?	Yes	No

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, please answer the next question.

11. On a scale of 1–10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest, how much does this bother you?

Lowest 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Highest

APPENDIX B

Resources for SPT Model with Victims of Bullies

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