



**ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION AND PEER INFLUENCE AS
TWO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE PREJUDICE**

**AN IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE
ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE
PEER TRAINING PROGRAM**



INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and researchers at Yale University partnered on a project to evaluate ADL's A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute Peer Training Program. The resulting randomized controlled experiment, conducted during the 2004–2005 school year, involved more than 500 students from ten high schools across the United States. In addition to providing ADL with feedback on one of the League's largest field intervention programs, the Yale researchers aimed to establish social scientific evidence to further knowledge about anti-bias interventions.

Typically, evaluations of anti-bias programs are conducted without appropriate comparison groups, outcomes are measured with paper and pencil surveys immediately following the program, and behavioral change is rarely measured. The Yale researchers' study of the Peer Training Program is distinguished in the field in that it incorporated random assignment of program and comparison conditions, which is considered the gold standard of evaluation methodology. Like medical trials, this type of study design allows researchers to conclude that the program had a causal impact. Moreover, the Yale researchers' study of the Peer Training Program builds on a scant base of research on anti-bias programs that combine both instructional approaches (which attempt to modify the knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals) and peer influence approaches (which attempt to change the social norms of the school or peer group).

THE PEER TRAINING PROGRAM

ADL's A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute Peer Training Program is based on the premise that anti-bias education can and should be spread through the most powerful agents of change in a high school—the students themselves. Thus, students who participate in anti-bias trainings over the course of one semester become "Peer Trainers" who spread anti-bias messages and model anti-bias behaviors throughout their school. Currently, the program is operational in 189 high schools in 18 states in the U.S., and 16 countries internationally.

The program progresses from an instruction-based approach to a combined instruction and peer influence approach. First, Peer Trainers participate in a three-day ADL-led intensive training to begin to develop a better understanding of anti-bias topics and to build skills as peer educators. The training explores such topics as personal and cultural identity, stereotyping, the potential of language to perpetuate bias and the various manifestations of bias in society, in communities, and in schools. Students also have opportunities to develop and practice the necessary skills to speak with other students about these issues. After this initial training, Peer Trainers attend regular meetings designed to increase their understanding of anti-bias education and to build their skills as peer educators. Curricular content includes an exploration of the various manifestations of bias, including ableism (prejudice against those with mental and/or physical disabilities), ageism, classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and other forms of religious bigotry. Awareness of bias and development of the skills and self-efficacy required to respond to incidents of bias among peers are the two main goals of the Peer Trainer instruction.

Throughout this process, Peer Trainers have opportunities to role-play scenarios in which they practice effective responses to bias, and they also learn presentation and group facilitation skills to prepare them to lead workshops and discussion groups for other students in their schools. As a result, these students become catalysts for positive change in their school communities by helping to address expressions of prejudice that are common in school cultures, including stereotypes, name-calling, social exclusion, and other forms of harassment.

The Anti-Defamation League lists the following goals for Peer Trainers.

Peer Trainers should:

- Gain a vocabulary for discussing issues of diversity, bigotry and discrimination.
- Understand democratic principles and their personal roles in promoting justice and equity.
- Recognize and acknowledge prejudice and discriminatory behavior in themselves and others.
- Feel able and confident disseminating knowledge and skills throughout the school and community that increase awareness of issues relating to prejudice.

STUDY METHOD

Each of the ten schools in the sample was paired with a similar school, based on a range of demographic characteristics such as teacher to student ratio, percentage of students receiving reduced lunch at the school, and the ethnic and racial composition of the school community. One school from each pair was randomly assigned to *treatment* (early start, in the fall) and the other to *control* (waiting list, start in the spring). Prior to the randomized assignment, future Peer Trainers at all participating schools provided the names of eight students who were peers (described as “classmates, acquaintances you talk with in the hallway, people who are in your homeroom, etc.”) and the names of two of their best friends. The lists of friends and peers were used to build two subgroups in each school sample—of Peer Trainers’ good friends (hereafter “Friends”) and peers (“Peers”).

The study’s measurement goals can be classified into four general categories: 1) students’ knowledge of and attitudes toward the anti-bias instructional content, 2) students’ awareness of bias-related incidents and behaviors in their environment, 3) students’ typical attitudes or statements about stopping bias, and 4) students’ demonstrated anti-bias behaviors.

The study’s primary measurement instrument was phone interview surveys conducted with student participants after the treatment schools had gone through four to five months of training and just before the start of the control schools’ program. This design is a conservative test of the program, which requires a minimum of ten weeks of Peer Trainer meetings before students begin implementing formal presentations and workshops with their peers. Students were “blind” to the purposes of the phone interviews in order to minimize demand on students to provide the “right” answers to the evaluation.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample included 539 students: 144 Peer Trainers, 143 Friends, and 252 Peers. Three quarters of these students were in the 10th or 11th grade. Fifty-four percent (285) of these students were female and 66% (351) of the students described themselves as European American. The second most frequent self-description of race or ethnicity (11%) was “other,” in which many students described themselves as coming from a mixed racial or ethnic background. Nine percent identified as Latino or Latina, 7% as African American, 4% as East Asian, and 3% as South Asian. Parental permission for students’ participation in the study was obtained for all students.

RESULTS

Unless otherwise specified, all reported results are statistically significant at the .05 level.

1 Knowledge and attitudes related to anti-bias instructional content

Three items were used to measure gains from the instructional portion of the program. The first two related to the Peer Training Program's message that democratic ideals can be used to promote justice and equity among groups. Participants were asked to respond with their level of agreement or disagreement to the following statements: *"I believe in free speech for everybody, no matter what his or her views might be"* and, *"Society shouldn't have to put up with people who have political ideas that are extremely different than the majority."* With respect to the program's emphasis on societal prejudice, the following item was used: *"U.S. society prevents people of color from getting their fair share of the good things in life, such as better jobs and more money."*

Instruction had mixed effects on the knowledge and attitudes gained from the Peer Training program. Although endorsement of "free speech, no matter what the person's views might be" was high in both treatment and control schools, the program caused treatment Peer Trainers to moderate their views on unadulterated free speech. Fifty percent of treatment Peer Trainers agreed "strongly" with this statement, compared to 85% of controls. Friends and Peers in the control schools were also more likely to agree with unadulterated free speech, but the comparison with treatment schools was only significant for Peers. Tolerance of extreme political viewpoints was lower in control compared to treatment across the three types of students, but this difference was not significant.¹

The program had its intended impact on students' understanding of structural discrimination against people of color in the U.S. Peer Trainers in treatment schools were significantly more likely to agree that structural discrimination exists. Treatment Friends were also significantly higher than Friends in control schools in their acknowledgement of structural discrimination. The program increased acknowledgement of structural discrimination against people of color among both white students and students of color. Students of color were significantly more likely than white students to agree that structural discrimination exists, but the effect of the program was still significant even when race and ethnicity were taken into account. The effect of the Peer Training Program was determined to be greater than the influence of a student's identity as a person of color for believing that structural discrimination exists.

2 Awareness of bias-related incidents and behaviors in their environment

To measure students' awareness of social bias in their school, researchers asked students when they last overheard someone teasing or insulting a person at their school about their weight. Answers reliably fell into four categories: 1) sometime in the past week, 2) sometime in the past month, 3) sometime in the past year, 4) I've never heard that kind of teasing. Peer Trainers in treatment schools were found to be the most aware of teasing, followed by Friends and Peers in their schools.

¹ Peer Trainers, Friends, and Peers in treatment schools were less likely to endorse "free speech for everyone, no matter what their views may be." At first blush this finding appears to clash with certain views of democratic free speech as the necessary precondition of social tolerance. The study's authors speculate, however, that the finding may reflect the program's focus on the harmful effects of derogatory speech. The treatment students' moderated enthusiasm for free speech may reflect a reconsideration of the boundaries of free speech, prompted by their engagement with the program.

73% of Peer Trainers in treatment schools stated that they had overheard teasing in their school sometime in the previous week, compared to only 42% of control Peer Trainers, while only 4% of treatment Peer Trainers, compared to 22% of control Peer Trainers, stated that they “never” overheard teasing. Although the same pattern of greater awareness of teasing among treatment Friends and Peers was also observed, the results were not statistically significant.

Researchers also asked students to name anyone in their entire school population (including themselves) whom they believed would stand up to teasing or insulting on someone else’s behalf. The following scenario was proposed to students:

Imagine that you were in a situation at your school where one student was being teased or insulted, about anything, not just their weight. Among the people you know at your school, who do you think would be most likely to stand up for that student, maybe in front of the group, or maybe later on by confronting the person who was teasing him or her?

Researchers expected a greater number of positive bystanders named in treatment schools since the Peer Training program is meant to create a culture in which students object to teasing and insulting, and indeed, people from treatment schools named significantly *more* bystanders. This finding was not solely the result of Peer Trainers nominating more active bystanders as a result of their training. Students in the treatment Friends category also named a significantly higher number of bystanders: treatment Friends nominated an average of 2.1 people and control Friends nominated an average of 1.6.

3 Typical attitudes or statements about anti-bias interactions

Responsibility for being an ally or active bystander is one of the pillars of the Peer Training Program. To measure students’ attitudes about interacting with others in the spirit of prejudice reduction, students were asked whether they thought students *should* intervene if they overhear a person being teased or insulted about their weight, and whether intervening in such a situation could be effective. Evaluation data indicated that the ideas that students *should* be active bystanders and that active bystanders are effective existed at relatively high levels in both treatment and control populations. Ninety-two percent of treatment Peer Trainers stated that students who overheard teasing or insulting should step in, and a lesser but statistically similar percentage (85%) of control Peer Trainers thought the same. There were no significant differences in these attitudes between Friends or Peers either, with approximately 75% endorsing the idea of the responsibility and effectiveness of active bystanders. Seventy-five percent of treatment Peer Trainers compared to 69% of control Peer Trainers thought active bystandership is an effective way to stop teasing, and 55% of treatment friends and 69% of treatment Peers agreed, compared to 53% and 66% of control Friends and Peers.

Free responses to follow-up questions about active bystandership from those in treatment schools demonstrated a greater understanding of the negative impact of teasing on the target, a recognition that teasing is one possible manifestation of prejudice, and an appreciation for the power of peers for preventing such actions. In the control group, ideas about why one should be an active bystander existed without much elaboration or explanation; for example, one should intervene “*just because teasing is wrong.*” Control students were 7.2 percentage points more likely to respond with this kind of logic, without providing supporting reasons pertaining to an ethic of care, empathy, or student responsibility. In treatment schools, Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to respond that students should intervene out of a sense of responsibility, including a responsibility for school culture (e.g., “*if you step in to stop teasers, this sets the tone for your school*”), a responsibility conferred by the power of peer influence (e.g., “*you should step in because students listen to other students*”), or a related kind of moral or practical responsibility.

Treatment Peer Trainers were more likely to mention empathy or sympathy (“*I’d feel so badly for the person*”), and were also 8.6 percentage points less likely to argue that students should *not* be active bystanders (e.g., “*People shouldn’t get involved in other people’s business*”), but neither of these findings were statistically significant. As for whether intervening would work, treatment Peer Trainers saw more reasons for why intervening could work. Thus, overall, while all students had preexisting ideas about social norms for active bystandership—the should’s and would’s of standing up for others—the Peer Training program seemed to help all students better understand the rationale for being allies and active bystanders, and this was particularly true for Peer Trainers.

4 Demonstrated anti-bias behavior

Researchers measured behavior in three ways—with self-report, with independent peer reports, and with an actual behavioral observation during the phone interview.

Talking about prejudice

If the program was successful in achieving its goals, researchers expected Peer Trainers to talk more about social bias with their classmates, and to feel more comfortable doing so. The results supported both hypotheses. Thirty three percent of treatment Peer Trainers stated that they discussed issues of social bias “very often,” compared to 22% of control Peer Trainers, while only 13% of treatment Peer Trainers stated they talked about these issues “not so often,” compared to 30% of control Peer Trainers. Treatment Friends also reported they talked about social bias at higher rates than control Friends. Peers in treatment schools reported discussing social bias slightly more than controls, but this difference was not significant.

Moreover, Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to say that they felt comfortable discussing these issues. Fifty-eight percent of treatment Peer Trainers responded to this question using the highest rating, “extremely comfortable,” compared to 40% of control Peer Trainers. This effect spilled over to their Friends; there was no difference between Peers. Notably, comfort talking about social bias was correlated with amount of talking. The strong but not perfect relationship between these two phenomena suggests that participation in the program expands students’ comfort zones, and that conversations about social bias are taking place even when students have some level of discomfort.

Active bystandership and speaking out

A key program goal is to encourage Peer Trainers and their classmates to be allies or active bystanders—to speak up when they overhear biased jokes or observe an interaction that seems to be motivated by prejudice. Researchers assessed this goal through a series of unobtrusive measures, including independent peer reports of behavior. In the previously described question about teasing, students were asked to name classmates who were likely to be active bystanders at their school.

There was no difference in students’ *self*-nominations as active bystanders—students who said that they themselves would be likely to stand up for a target of teasing hovered around 50% in both treatment and control schools.

However, in data gathered that related to actual observed behaviors, researchers found that treatment Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to be active bystanders. A majority (58%) of treatment Peer Trainers were nominated by their fellow students as someone who would be likely to step in if a student was being teased or insulted, compared to 30% of control Peer Trainers who were nominated by other students.

The finding that treatment Peer Trainers have developed the motivation and skill to respond to bias is further supported by data that indicated that nominations were not more likely to come from fellow Peer Trainers, who had just spent five months discussing with fellow Peer Trainers how to be allies and active bystanders; treatment and control Peer Trainers nominated other Peer Trainers at a similar rate. The difference was driven by Friends and Peers: treatment Peer Trainers received significantly more nominations from Friends and from Peers, compared to control Peer Trainers. This pattern of findings is the inverse of what one would predict if the nominations represented a biased “nominate your friends” pattern, and suggest that the nominations demonstrate true behavioral effects of the program.

Researchers also measured two actual behaviors during the interview: they asked students whether they would volunteer their first and last names to be posted on a website petition to support gay rights, and/or for a better environment. The environment petition served as a comparison to the gay rights website, to gauge baseline rates of student activism and willingness to post one’s name on the Internet with regards to a topic that did not have the potential of social stigma. Compliance with signing the environment website was high across all groups—70% or more of each type of student agreed to have their first and last names on the website. Web activism on behalf of the environment was significantly higher among Peer Trainers in the treatment compared to control: 84% vs. 71% agreed to have their names on the petition. Friends and Peers in treatment and control schools volunteered their names for the environment website at comparable rates. Overall compliance with signing the gay rights petition was lower among all students relative to the environment petition. Around two-thirds of Peer Trainers and Friends and half of Peers offered their names for the petition. In each case, a greater percentage of students in the treatment school volunteered their names, but the effects were not significant.

However, interviewers noted that students at the one non-secular (Catholic) high school were much more likely to refuse to sign the website petition for gay rights on the basis of their opposition to gay marriage, “but not to other gay rights.” (It should be noted that the telephone survey followed the 2004 elections that brought gay marriage to the fore, practically defining “gay rights” as “gay marriage.”) Rates of signing the gay rights petition were significantly lower in this school compared to the rest of the schools in either treatment or control. It turned out that without the Catholic school, the treatment effect was significant, $\beta = .32$, $z = 2.55$, $p < .01$, among non-parochial schools. Students in the treatment schools were significantly more likely to sign their names to the website petition for gay rights, compared to control students.

DISCUSSION

The study findings reveal that the Peer Training Program had a positive impact on students in a variety of public and private schools across the U.S. following the first year of program activity at their school. Specifically, the program raises the salience of anti-bias issues, including awareness of the prevalence of biased practices in the high school and ways to address these practices. The Peer Training Program activated and enriched students’ pre-existing understandings about what they should and can do in situations where they observe bias. Program participants also identified anti-bias principles and actions as important and acceptable within their peer group. These changes manifested not only in students’ beliefs and attitudes, but in their anti-bias behaviors in school situations and in a situation where they had the opportunity to stand up to bias in society at large. Peer Trainers in particular were more likely to stand up for targets of derogatory teasing in their school, and they, along with friends and peers, were more likely to sign website petitions in support of stigmatized groups in the US. The combination of results across quantitative, qualitative, and behavior observation measures provides strong evidence that a program like the Peer Training Program, which combines instructional and peer influence strategies, can have an important effect on reducing bias in high schools.

Because the study design employed randomization and control groups, it can be stated with a high degree of confidence that these changes were initiated by the program activity at the students' school. That the program affected actual behaviors is particularly encouraging. An important criticism of the anti-bias intervention literature is that most program evaluations do not demonstrate behavioral change among their participants. This is one of the few studies to measure behavioral changes both within and outside the context of measurement.

All of the results reported here were achieved with a relatively small dosage of the Peer Training Program. Previously it was noted that post-test measurement occurred after treatment schools had gone through four to five months of training. Typically, ADL recommends over two months of Peer Trainer classes before students begin planning and delivering formal presentations and workshops for their classmates. The time constraint placed on this study, in which it was necessary to collect outcome data before peer training commenced in control schools, means that the study may be a conservative test of the program. These constraints preclude any assessment of whether observed positive effects would grow in strength or endure over time, or if some non-significant effects would become significant over additional time.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the positive results of the study, Yale evaluators' recommendations for changes to the program were few. They encouraged ADL to capitalize on the strong peer influence effects by emphasizing the importance of informal discussions and interventions with Peer Trainers' classmates. Dialogue about issues of bias and discrimination seems to be at the root of findings regarding greater awareness and more active anti-bias behaviors.

This summary report is based on a more extensive report authored by lead researchers, Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Donald P. Green. Copies of the full report are available through contacting the Anti-Defamation League.