

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



School-based abuse prevention programming: Implementation of child safety matters with minority youth

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Abstract

Schools are a natural choice for providing prevention information about victimisation to children and young people. This study examines the implementation of the Monique Burr Foundation's Child Safety Matters program with minority youth attending public school. The program was implemented with children aged four to 13 years, primarily in schools in low-income areas in a large, multicultural public school system. Pre- and post-test assessments of the program showed small significant improvements over time regardless of grade or gender, though with ceiling effects in the pre-tests. Regarding the most important information learned, youth responded with themes of bullying, safety rules, Internet safety and abuse. Five children made direct disclosures of sexual or physical abuse to the presenter and were subsequently reported to the child abuse hotline. Teachers, in whose classrooms the program was delivered, reported satisfaction with the program, and an increased sense of competence in identifying abuse. Implications for administering and assessing prevention programs are provided.

KEYWORDS

abuse prevention, bullying prevention, child sexual abuse prevention education, minority youth, school-based curriculum

Key Practitioner Messages

- School wide prevention programming can begin in schools with children as young as 5 years of age and expose a wide range of students to important knowledge and self-protection skills.
- Children who participated in the Child Safety Matters program showed significant gains in knowledge over time regardless of grade or gender.
- Participation in a school-based abuse prevention program may lead to disclosures of abuse among participants.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of an idyllic childhood is not a reality for many children. The US Department of Health and Human Services (2021) Administration of Children report titled *Child Maltreatment* indicates that 656,000 children in the United States were victims of maltreatment in 2019. Slightly over 7 per cent of these youth were victims of childhood sexual abuse. Minority youth and those from low-income homes are at increased risk of child maltreatment. Risk factors to maltreatment include caregiver characteristics such as financial problems, inadequate housing and public assistance (US Department Health and Human Services, 2021). Thus, prevention programs with youth from these homes is critical due to their increased risk of abuse.

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Historically, prevention programs, particularly those focusing on childhood sexual abuse, were developed without consideration of minority youth (Kenny, 2010). In an effort to address the lack of prevention programming with minority children, Holloway and Pulido (2018) implemented the Safe Touches program in schools where more than 75 per cent of students were receiving free lunch and contained less than 25 per cent white students. They found that the children showed increased knowledge of certain child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention concepts after a single 50-minute workshop with sustained knowledge gains at short-term follow up. In another study, with a multiracial, low socioeconomic, urban population of children, Pulido et al. (2015) found a significant increase in the inappropriate touch score but not in the appropriate touch scores. Daigneault et al. (2012) examined the ESPACE program (90-minute workshop) in schools serving underprivileged children in Quebec, Canada. This program is intended to prevent bullying as well as psychological, physical and sexual abuse in children. While there were no differences found in knowledge in the control and experimental group after the program, a follow-up two years after the ESPACE workshop found that all participating children had greater knowledge of inappropriate touching and were significantly less often victimised by peers. These results are promising and provide some evidence for the utility of these programs with low-income youth. Daigneault et al. (2012) concluded that programs may need to be adapted in order to optimise their effects with specific clientele, particularly low-income clientele. Cultural factors may also affect how children learn prevention concepts (Topping & Barron, 2009), so there is a need to more fully examine prevention programming with ethically and culturally diverse populations.

Offering primary prevention programs in schools allows for all children to be exposed to these educational concepts, rather than targeting at-risk or specific groups of youth. Given that school is compulsory, offering prevention programs allows for universal exposure to programming. Research has found compelling evidence for programming in schools in a variety of areas. Walsh et al. (2015) found that children's self-protective skills and knowledge can be increased by participation in school-based sexual abuse prevention programs. Research has also found that skills-based programs help to deter drug use (Faggiano et al., 2008) and that school-based prevention programs have potential to reduce mental health burden (Werner-Seidler et al., 2017). Bullying prevention offered in schools reduces both bullying victimisation and perpetration (Gaffney et al., 2019). School staff often have training in child development, as well as effective communication with youth, which can facilitate these discussions (Buettner et al., 2016). Schools are often a safe setting for children to learn about child sexual abuse, and with proper training and skills, school personnel can be trusted adults to whom children can disclose abuse (Wurtele & Kenny, 2018). As Ritchie stated, 'schools are experienced and credible when it comes to talking with children about danger, with such conversations often happening right from the beginning of kindergarten' (p. 296). Early discussion, including equipping children with necessary knowledge and skills, can be achieved in school systems. Providing primary prevention allows for topics to be discussed that parents may not feel comfortable with or knowledgeable about (e.g. sexual abuse, see Flores & Barroso, 2017; Kenny & Wurtele, 2013).

CHILD SAFETY MATTERS

The Child Safety Matters (CSM) program by the Monique Burr Foundation is a school-based curriculum created for use with elementary school-age children (kindergarten–fifth grade). The goal is to educate and empower students with strategies to recognise abusive situations and alert adults to keep them safe. In Florida, Statute 39 and the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up For All Students Act as amended July 2013 by Florida law, Chapter 2013–87, requires schools to provide cyberbullying prevention education to students, parents and staff. The CSM program meets this requirement and has been adopted in schools in approximately 26 states and three countries (S. Pendarvis, personal communication, 6 January, 2020). CSM includes two live lessons (ranging in delivery time from 35 to 55 minutes) on topics including safety and responsibility, safe adults, safety rules, types of abuse, why and how abuse happens, abuse red flags and reporting, social-emotional learning, character development, bullying/cyberbullying, technology/digital dangers (gaming, virtual reality and social media), digital safety and digital citizenship. Lessons are delivered by trained Certified Facilitators, who must complete a three-hour face-to-face or asynchronous online training. The CSM program materials are provided free of cost to Florida public schools and organisations partnering with Florida public schools through a generous appropriation from the Florida Office of the Attorney General. Other school districts must purchase the curriculum. The lessons typically occur 2–6 weeks apart in line with best practices for prevention education. The CSM program is recommended to be delivered in a whole-school approach where the entire school embraces the program and reinforces the rules that are learned. This is done through orienting all school staff on the program before implementation and hanging CSM posters and signs throughout the school. (For more information about the program, visit the program website at <https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/why-use-our-programs/mbf-child-safety-matters/>).

Evaluation of CSM

Jones and Ah Jung (2015) evaluated the CSM program in Florida including both Certified Facilitator online surveys and phone or face-to-face interviews ($N = 185$), a desk review of the CSM curriculum and pre-post assessment of the child participants. A total of 620 kindergarten through fifth grade students were administered a pre- and post-test assessment to gauge total gains, and 96 per cent of students demonstrated post-test gains. The gains ranged from 2 to 3 points. Responses to the online survey indicated that most of the Certified Facilitators (53%) reported incorporating some of the CSM lessons into the classroom during the past year. Half of the Certified Facilitators had positive opinions about the CSM lessons highlighting the exhaustive, clear and succinct nature of the lessons that appeal to a diverse range of students. Many Certified Facilitators, however, found that the lesson plans were too long, they did not have enough time to incorporate these lessons into the curriculum and had to condense the lesson plans due to the time constraints.

In the only published randomised control trial (RCT) of the CSM program, Bright et al. (2020) implemented the CSM program in the state of Florida with 1176 students from 72 classrooms. Schools were matched in pairs and randomly assigned to either receive the program or be in a wait-list control. Knowledge was assessed with a questionnaire administered to students prior to the curriculum delivery as well as approximately three weeks after and again at approximately seven months after program delivery. The interaction of treatment and time was significant, $F(2, 90) = 17.024, p < 0.000$. Children who received the curriculum increased their knowledge about potentially risky situations, and this knowledge was sustained over seven months to the follow-up assessment. Children in the control schools did not have similar gains.

BENEFITS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Educating children about safety, particularly child sexual abuse, is an important step in prevention. Walsh et al. (2015) examined 24 child-focused CSA prevention programs and found that children's self-protective skills and knowledge significantly improved after program participation and the gains were maintained over six months. Regardless of the country where the program was implemented, children of all ages who had participated in a CSA education program that used simulation situations (three of the 24 studies) were six to seven times more likely to demonstrate protective behaviour in simulated situations than children who did not participate (Walsh et al., 2015). Recently, Kenny et al. (2020) found that college students who had not participated in a CSA prevention program were significantly more likely to report sexual abuse than those who did participate, regardless of the program. However, there is also a body of literature that has found that education has not led to decreased victimisation (Finkelhor et al., 2014). White et al. (2018) found that a safety program improved children's protective behaviours knowledge (as rated by children and parents) but did not impact children's disclosure intentions or safety identification skills. In another study, children who participated in a safety program were more likely to report the use of self-protection strategies. However, when threatened by an abuser, they were less likely to stop the abuse and in fact suffered injuries as a result of resisting (Finkelhor et al., 1995). Thus, no firm conclusions can be made about the benefits of participation until more longitudinal studies are done.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The goal of this study was to evaluate the CSM program with an ethnically diverse sample of elementary school children in schools in Miami-Dade County, known to be low-income areas in Florida, using pre- and post-testing. The schools that were chosen are located in a region known for high rates of violence with police reporting the second-highest rate of allegations of child abuse/child neglect and the third-highest rate of juvenile delinquency in all of the larger city. The most recent Miami-Dade County Community Health Needs Assessment Household Survey Report (2013) showed that the emotional wellbeing and mental health of 15 per cent of children (ages five to 17) in this region was rated as 'poor or fair', nearly three times the rate of Miami-Dade children and 50 per cent higher than the state-wide rate of 10.2 per cent. Approximately 27 per cent in this area live below the poverty line. A large part of the population is made up of families from Central America and South America, with the population estimated at 60 per cent Hispanic/Latino residents primarily from Mexico and Cuba. More than one-third of the population (35%) is between the ages of zero to 17, and 42 per cent of the population are foreign born. The researchers in the current study sought to examine the knowledge gained by the participants as well as the teachers' perspectives on the program and feedback from the children with regard to what they might have learned. It was not possible to implement a fully experimental design due to the constraints of doing research in a very large public school district in the United States; the authors did not have the manpower to carry out an RCT. In addition, the student body at some of the schools is a

transient population and it was decided that it would be best to have as many children and youth receive the program as feasible, as soon as possible. Given the chosen student population, it is hoped that these results can inform the usefulness of this or similar programs with low-income, minority youth.

METHOD

Participants

Two thousand four hundred and fifty students from Miami-Dade County, the fourth largest and diverse school district in the United States, served as participants. They ranged in age from four to 13 years ($M = 7.84$, $SD = 1.72$). The participants were equally represented by male (50.2%) and female (49.8%) students. They consisted of 22.8 per cent kindergarten students, 22.3 per cent first graders, 18.4 per cent second graders, 22.4 per cent third graders, 6 per cent fourth graders and 8.1 per cent fifth graders. Two percent were identified as students in English as a Second Language (ESOL) programs.

Procedure

The study received institutional board (IRB) approval from the first author's university (#18-0101) as well as approval from the public school system (#2272) in which the study was conducted. The school district's student services department also approved the program being offered in the schools. Eight schools which were located in a rural area outside of a large, diverse metropolitan area participated, given the lack of available resources and need for outreach in that geographical region. The principals at the schools were contacted about potential program delivery and provided information about CSM. After approval from the principal, the Certified Facilitator scheduled a time to present to the school staff first, so that they could become familiar with curriculum and aware of the school-wide implementation. This is referred to in the CSM manual as the Staff Training and Safety Brief for classroom teachers. This training consists of information provided in the CSM Facilitator Manual and was delivered face-to-face to staff during staff meetings at the school. The presentation can be 10 minutes or 45 minutes, depending on the time allotted at the school and includes basic information about the program and the topics included. The safety rules are reviewed and how to handle a potential disclosure of abuse is discussed. The study began January 2018 and ended in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic hit and schools were closed.

After the Staff Training and Safety Brief was provided to school staff, the Certified Facilitator scheduled the program delivery dates with either the administration or school counsellor. The Certified Facilitator would prepare folders for each classroom with materials provided by CSM including opt-out forms, CSM bookmarks with the five safety rules and 'You Are My Safe Adult' (two per child), follow-up activities for parents and a CSM poster for each class. The Certified Facilitator also provided the classroom teacher with other materials with CSM branding including stickers, pencils, backpack attachments, coloured pencils, etc. to give to the children. The opt-out forms in English and Spanish were sent home to parents by teachers. Teachers kept track of children (approximately two to three per school) whose parents opted them out of the program. The Certified Facilitator then came to the classroom primarily during 'specials' (e.g. music, art) or non-instructional time to deliver the program. As recommended by the facilitator manual, teachers remained in the classroom during the lesson to gain exposure to the material and ensure they would be able to reinforce the content later. The school Safety Rules banner was also provided to schools. With regard to parent involvement, materials were sent home that included a review of the safety rules for them to reinforce at home. All of the materials are part of the CSM school-wide implementation and are done regardless of research activities.

Child safety matters curriculum

Monique Burr Foundation Child Safety Matters[®] is a comprehensive, evidence-based curriculum for elementary school students in grades K–five. The program educates and empowers children and all relevant adults with information and strategies to prevent, recognise and respond appropriately to bullying, cyberbullying, all types of abuse and digital abuse dangers.

Children are taught five safety rules: (1) Know What's Up (i.e. let a safe adult know where you are and what you are doing when you are away, know your contact information and a family password); (2) Spot Red Flags (i.e. learn about personal space and boundaries, respecting self and others, safe vs. unsafe situations, secrets, names for private

parts); (3) Make a Move (i.e. move away from a harmful situation of abuse or bullying); (4) Talk It Up (i.e. talk to safe adults about red flags or if you feel unsafe); and (5) No Blame, No Shame (i.e. no matter what happens, it is not your fault, adults are responsible for keeping kids safe). These are rules that are applied to various situations. The CSM materials are included in the Certified Facilitator manual, flash drive or on the Facilitator Site. The Facilitator Site is a password-protected area on the Monique Burr CSM website for Certified Facilitators which includes resources, forms, downloads, implementation demonstration videos and the entire curriculum. Methods of instruction include video segments, songs, repetition and review of material (scenarios are shared and children display a thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate safety of situation).

The Certified Facilitator was a bilingual educator fluent in English and Spanish. The program was delivered in both languages depending on the student population and primary language. At times, the facilitator had to switch back and forth between languages. All supplemental materials, including bookmarks, temporary tattoos, student colouring bookmark and take-home activities (parent information and activity sheets) were left with the classroom teacher to distribute to the children. On average, there were seven days between the first and second lesson delivery in the schools.

In order to obtain feedback from classroom teachers whose class the CSM program was delivered in, an online follow-up survey was conducted. Four to five months after the program delivery, an e-mail was sent to principals of all participating schools regarding administration of a follow-up survey for these classroom teachers. Principals were requested to forward the request for participation onto the teachers in whose classrooms the program was originally delivered. The survey was an anonymous online 10-item Qualtrics survey. The instructions informed teachers that they would receive a \$5 e-gift card for participation sent to the e-mail they provided.

Program fidelity was assessed by having one of the researchers observe the Certified Facilitator deliver the program in four randomly chosen classrooms (<1%), of different grades. The researcher had a copy of the CSM Facilitator Manual and followed along with the CSM curriculum lesson and script noting which components were covered and any that were missing. Specifically, the Certified Facilitator covered all of the curriculum concepts outlined in the planned lesson according to the Facilitator Manual in the observed sessions. The facilitator was observed to deliver the program in both English and Spanish, at times reinforcing a point by repeating it in Spanish. All classrooms that were observed delivered the CSM curriculum with high fidelity to the program model, with little variability across classrooms. One hundred percent fidelity was obtained for handing out materials, following the Certified Facilitator Manual and reading the scenarios to the children. In one classroom, the researcher observed that the video shown was different from what was referenced in the Certified Facilitator Manual. Consultation with the Certified Facilitator later revealed that the correct one was missing in the materials. The Certified Facilitator contacted Monique Burr Foundation afterwards to obtain the missing video.

Measures

Child knowledge

A pre- and post-test measure provided by CSM was used. Three demographic questions were added for the purpose of this study to collect information about gender, age and grade level. The pre- and post-tests consisted of five items (statements) which varied by grade so that each grade received a different set of questions. For kindergarten to third grade, students responded by circling a thumbs up or thumbs down to indicate if they agreed with the statement or not. For fourth and fifth grade students, the response options were true/false. The post-test contained the same five statements as the pre-test. See Table 1 for the items by grade. The facilitator administered the pre- and post-tests to the children by reading it aloud in both English and Spanish to account for reading delays. Each child was handed a paper copy of the test and given a pencil to complete it at their desks. The pre-test was administered immediately before the CSM program was delivered and the post-test was administered immediately after the second session of CSM. The measure was also projected on to the Smart/Promethean Boards at schools for all students.

The following two measures were not part of the CSM and were included for research.

Most important piece of information

For 17 classrooms at three different schools, fourth and fifth grade students were also asked to include the most important piece of information they learned and were given space to write it on the reverse side of their post-assessment.

TABLE 1 CSM test items by grade

Grade	Statement
Kindergarten	<p>'Know What's Up', is the first Safety Rule I can use to help adults keep me safe.</p> <p>Safety Rule #4, 'Talk It Up', means I should call 9-1-1 in an emergency.</p> <p>Safety Rule #3, 'Make a Move', means it's time to exercise.</p> <p>I can help adults keep me safe by following the Safety Rules.</p> <p>When I go online to play games, I should only play with my parents' or guardians' permission.</p>
First Grade	<p>Safety Rule #1, 'Know What's Up' means I should know my personal information and safety procedures.</p> <p>A bystander is a person who helps someone being bullied.</p> <p>I can help adults keep me safe by following the Safety Rules.</p> <p>If a stranger asks me to help find a lost dog, Safety Rule #2, 'Spot Red Flags', tells me this situation may be unsafe.</p> <p>Safety Rule #3, 'Make a Move', means move closer to the person who is bothering me.</p>
Second Grade	<p>Safety Rule #2, 'Spot Red Flags', means I know the warning signs that a situation may be unsafe.</p> <p>Safety Rule #4, 'Talk It Up', tells me I should call 9-1-1 in an emergency.</p> <p>A Safe Adult is someone I know I can trust and count on to keep me safe.</p> <p>My private body parts are the ones that are covered by my shoes.</p> <p>It is safe to give out my personal information on the Internet because no one knows who I am.</p>
Third Grade	<p>If I tell a safe adult about an unsafe situation that's the same thing as tattling.</p> <p>I can talk to a Safety Buddy about unsafe situations and they can help me talk to a Safe Adult.</p> <p>The four types of child abuse are emotional, physical, sexual and neglect.</p> <p>It's okay to talk to people I do not know online because they always tell the truth about who they are.</p> <p>An upstander is someone who stands up to bullies or helps someone who is being bullied.</p>
Fourth Grade	<p>Safety Rule #2, 'Spot Red Flags', helps me recognise warning signs that let me know a situation or person might be unsafe.</p> <p>Child abuse always leaves a mark, like a bruise or a broken bone.</p> <p>I should not give out my personal information online, like where I go to school, where I like to hang out or my activities.</p> <p>I can always control what happens to things I post online.</p> <p>When bullying occurs online through cell phones, computers or games, it is called cyberbullying.</p>
Fifth Grade	<p>A digital safety tip that can help keep you safe is to only visit websites that have been approved by your parent/guardian.</p> <p>Child abuse is usually done by strangers.</p> <p>If I use Safety Rule #4, 'Talk It Up', and tell someone about a situation that is unsafe, that is the same as tattling or snitching.</p> <p>Safety Rule #1, 'Know What's Up', can include knowing a family password so I only go with someone who has permission from my parent/guardian to pick me up.</p> <p>An example of a Red Flag is when someone I do not know asks for my personal information.</p>

Classroom teacher survey

A custom-made measure was used with classroom teachers in whose classrooms the program was delivered. The survey included 10 statements that classroom teachers rated on a scale of 0 to 100. All statements can be seen in Table 2.

RESULTS

The total valid sample for pre-test is 2439, the total sample for post-test is 2160. The attrition is 279, which is 11 per cent. There were 2053 matched pairs (pre- and post-test recorded), which indicates the number of children who took the pre- and post-test. Attrition is due to absenteeism, which is high in these schools and not due to parental withdrawal of consent. All the statistical analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Version 27. Little's MCAR test (Little, 1988) was run to check the missing data patterns and the result showed that the test was not significant ($\chi^2 = 9.27$, $p = 0.06$), indicating that the data was missing completely at random.

TABLE 2 Teachers survey (n = 23)

Statements	Mean	Std. deviation
I have gained knowledge on child abuse safety and prevention strategies.	85.45	16.02
I believe that my students are more likely to seek a safe adult if they have been abused.	84.77	15.20
I believe that my students are more able to identify warning signs of possible dangerous behaviours and therefore avoid abuse.	83.55	16.87
I am more confident in my ability to identify possible signs of abuse and seek support to protect my students.	87.50	14.80
I believe that students have a better understanding of body privacy, safety and respect.	85.23	13.69
I think that my students are more able to identify inappropriate digital content and avoid Internet predators as a result of this presentation.	81.14	17.51
I believe that youth will prefer to develop character traits associated with upstanders as opposed to bystanders.	84.41	14.63
Students have an improved understanding as to why they should not share personal information online or communicate online with people they do not know in person.	83.77	17.38
The presenter was able to engage and relate to the students thoroughly and efficiently.	88.05	18.26
The media elements/activities in the presentation were relevant and engaging.	85.95	17.90

Note. Scale is from 0 to 100.

TABLE 3 Pre- and post-test scores and effect sizes for all grades

Grade	N	Pre-test score mean (SD)	Post-test score mean (SD)	ES
Kindergarten	441	2.97 (0.88)	3.60 (2.51)**	0.23
First grade	480	3.63 (0.96)	3.93 (1.02)**	0.28
Second grade	372	3.66 (0.88)	4.22 (0.79)**	0.58
Third grade	436	4.13 (1.02)	4.42 (0.95)**	0.35
Fourth grade	140	3.47 (0.93)	4.00 (0.91)**	0.53
Fifth grade	184	4.05 (0.84)	4.56 (0.70)**	0.59

** $p < 0.001$; the sample size reflects the final valid sample size at each grade. Scores range from 0 to 5.

Child knowledge

Table 3 provides the pre- and post-test scores for all grades. Although ceiling effects were observed in pre-test scores, the result from a paired sample t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between pre- and post-test scores ($t(2052) = 13.74$, $p < 0.001$). Post-test scores ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.47$) were significantly higher than pre-test scores ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.00$), with a medium effect size ($d = 0.30$). There was no significant gender difference ($t(1706) = 0.31$, $p = 0.08$) or grade difference ($F(51759) = 1.76$, $p = 0.12$) in the pre-post score difference, suggesting that the significant pre-post score difference exists regardless of gender and grade level. We broke down the pre-post test score differences by grade level and found significant differences at $p < 0.001$ between pre- and post-test scores at all levels. The effect sizes of the differences ranged from small (0.23) to medium (0.59) (Cohen, 1988; see Table 3).

Further analyses showed that there was no gender difference in pre- ($t(2353) = 1.42$, $p = 0.15$) or post-test scores ($t(2082) = 1.32$, $p = 0.19$). But significant grade differences were found in both pre- ($F(52433) = 95.87$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$) and post-test scores ($F(52154) = 22.77$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$). Interestingly, students in third grade had the highest pre-test score, which was significantly higher than those in kindergarten, first, second and fourth grades but was comparable to fifth grade. Students in fifth grade had the highest post-test scores, followed by third grade students, who had significantly higher scores than students in other grades (see Table 3).

Table 4 shows the percentage of correct answers in pre- and post-tests by question and grade. For question one, the percentage of correct answers in pre-test ranged from 76.8 per cent to 94.4 per cent. Question five also had 75.3 per cent to 92.5 per cent pre-test correct answers across all the grades. Conversely, question 2 had a low percentage of correct answers in post-test, ranging from 40.6 per cent (fourth grade) to 88.9 per cent (third grade). For this question ('I can talk to a Safety Buddy about unsafe situations and they can help me talk to a Safe Adult'), the third graders had 88.2 per cent correct in pre-test and remained at 88.9 per cent on post-test. In general, the lower grades appeared to have a lower percentage of students who answered the questions correctly. For example, the percentage of correct answers in post-test scores for kindergarten ranged from 44.5 per cent to 87.3 per cent, compared to that for fifth graders ranging from 77.6

TABLE 4 Percentage correct on pre- and post-test question by grade

Questions	Pre-post/grade	Kindergarten % (n)	First % (n)	Second % (n)	Third % (n)	Fourth % (n)	Fifth % (n)	M (SD)	t-test results
Q1	Pre	85.8% (479)	87.6% (474)	76.8% (345)	82.7% (454)	78.2% (115)	94.4% (187)	0.85 (0.36)	$t(2056) = 5.71^{***}$
	Post	87.3% (407)	91.2% (465)	85.7% (336)	89.1% (410)	92.3% (132)	96.9% (186)	0.90 (0.30)	
Q2	Pre	31.4% (175)	54.9% (297)	20.7% (93)	88.2% (484)	23.1% (34)	38.4% (76)	0.47 (0.50)	$t(2056) = 15.85^{***}$
	Post	44.5% (207)	74.9% (382)	59.2% (232)	88.9% (409)	40.6% (58)	77.6% (149)	0.66 (0.47)	
Q3	Pre	27.3% (152)	91.1% (493)	89.8% (404)	69.8% (383)	91.8% (135)	88.4% (178)	0.72 (0.45)	$t(2055) = 10.90^{***}$
	Post	55.1% (256)	90.0% (459)	94.4% (370)	86.5% (398)	93.7% (134)	95.3% (183)	0.84 (0.37)	
Q4	Pre	77.7% (432)	47.5% (257)	91.8% (413)	88.5% (486)	59.2% (87)	90.4% (179)	0.75 (0.43)	$t(2052) = 6.60^{***}$
	Post	80.8% (374)	55.6% (283)	95.4% (373)	93.5% (430)	76.9% (110)	95.3% (183)	0.81 (0.39)	
Q5	Pre	75.3% (418)	81.5% (441)	85.8% (386)	83.1% (456)	92.5% (136)	92.4% (183)	0.83 (0.37)	$t(2049) = 3.04^*$
	Post	82.0% (379)	81.2% (415)	87.7% (343)	87.4% (402)	97.9% (140)	92.2% (177)	0.86 (0.34)	

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.001$; changes in the percentage of correct answers in pre- and post-tests over 10% were bold and italicized in the table.

per cent to 96.9 per cent. Comparatively speaking, question two showed most changes in percentage of correct answers between pre- and post-tests across all the questions as all grade levels except the third grade showed significant improvements in post-test. Two grade levels in question 3 showed more than 10 per cent change of correct answers between pre- and post-tests (28% in kindergarten and 17% in third grade). Fourth grade in questions 1 and 4 had more than 10 per cent change (see Table 4). Although some questions had very high pre-test scores in some grade levels, the means of post-test scores in the five questions were all significantly higher than those of pre-test scores (see Table 4), which is consistent with the overall significant pre-post-test score difference and significant score difference by grade level.

Most important piece of information

Fifty-two fourth grade children and 61 fifth grade children provided comments to the prompt, 'What is the most important piece of information you learned?'. These comments were transcribed from the students' answer sheets into a Word document by one researcher and translated from Spanish to English when necessary. Two independent coders reviewed the comments and performed frequency counts of commonly appearing themes. Safety/Rules/Lessons (i.e. safety rules, being cautious and not trusting strangers, being aware of surroundings, red flags) were reported by 27 fifth graders and 17 fourth graders. The concept of bully/bullying/cyberbullying (i.e. 'do not bully', cyberbullying, talk to adult if being bullied, speaking up) were reported by seven fifth graders and 14 fourth grade students. Abuse (i.e. four types of abuse, 'most kids are abused by family members', what to do in case of being abused, 'no blame no shame') was reported equally among fourth and fifth grade students (six students per grade level). The notion of trust (i.e. 'you shouldn't trust strangers', seek out permission from parents, 'you shouldn't trust everyone you meet, especially on the Internet') was reported by seven fourth graders and six fifth grade students. The theme of Internet/Private Information (i.e. keeping information private on social media, do not talk with strangers on the internet, 'know your private information') was reported by 10 fourth grade students and 14 fifth grade students.

Classroom teacher survey

Twenty-three school staff (20%) from four of the schools responded to the follow-up survey. They were primarily female (95%) and classroom teachers (81%). Nine per cent were administrators, 5 per cent were school guidance counsellors and the remainder selected 'other' for school role. They had on average 19 years of experience (range: 2–33 years).

In general, school personnel had positive feedback on the program. In reply to the question, how well were your expectations met on a scale from zero (not at all) to 10 (exceeded my expectations), the average rating was 8.47 ($SD = 1.82$). Among the highest rated statements was, 'I am more confident in my ability to identify possible signs of abuse and seek support to protect my students', indicating the classroom teachers possibly learned about signs of abuse. Ninety-five per cent of staff reported that they would recommend this program to another school. Table 3 shows the results of the feedback they provided on the program.

Disclosures of abuse

During the administration of the program, there were some disclosures of abuse to the facilitator. There was a total of four students who disclosed child sexual abuse (three were clearly victims and one reported on his sister who was victim). One of the four incidents involved a family member perpetrator. There was an additional report of physical abuse by a student. In all cases, the school counsellor was notified, and reports of abuse were made by the school counsellor and Certified Facilitator together at the school. There were some minor disclosures by children of what appeared typical peer behaviour not to the extent of bullying. These behaviours included children saying curse words and identifying others as not kind, but were not considered bullying which would constitute ongoing, repeated misuse of power, or intention to cause harm.

Certified facilitator challenges

The Certified Facilitator provided feedback to the researchers throughout the duration of program implementation. This was done through informal discussions by phone and in person. As is true with most collaborations between

community agencies and school districts, it took some time to establish the legal agreements and gain administrative approval to deliver the CSM program. Securing schools that were willing to participate was also difficult. There were challenges in schools with timing given the time devoted to mandatory state assessments in the Spring of each academic year given to students in all grades. In some schools, the kindergarten children had difficulty writing on the response sheets or following instructions. A fair amount of classroom management was needed with some classes to keep the children engaged and on task. While the Certified Facilitator was bilingual, several of the children at one school did not speak English or Spanish but rather a specific dialect from their country of origin. There was no feasible way to accommodate them in the delivery of the program. In addition, it is difficult to discern the level of commitment of some classroom teachers to continuing to practice the program. At times, students had not received the bookmarks or other follow-up materials that had been left for distribution by classroom teachers between CSM lessons.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to evaluate a school-based primary prevention curriculum for teaching child safety and preventing child victimisation with a population of low-income, minority youth. The study findings show small gains in knowledge from pre- to post-testing across all grades and both genders, though with ceiling effects in pre-test scores. These results are consistent with Bright et al. (2020) and Jones and Ah Jung (2015) who also found gains in knowledge from pre- to post-testing with the CSM program but with different populations of students. However, both of those studies used researcher-created measures, while the assessment of child knowledge in the current study was part of the CSM curriculum.

The gains in knowledge are supported by the comments written by the fourth and fifth grade students. The students who responded to the most important piece of information prompt were able to recall specific pieces of information that they learned. The concepts were primarily centred on abuse, bullying/cyberbullying and Internet safety. The rules taught in the program were often cited by the students. This is important as one question in grade two was often incorrect. The question for kindergarten and second grade states, 'Safety Rule #4, "Talk It Up", tells me I should call 9-1-1 in an emergency'. While this is not the CSM Safety Rule #4, calling 9-1-1 in an emergency is certainly an appropriate action to take to stay safe. Thus, it may be confusing for children – they knew a safe action to take but that action is not Rule #4. (Safety Rule #4 is talk to safe adults about red flags or if you feel unsafe). The rates of incorrect at post-test for this item were 44.5.6 per cent and 59.2 per cent, respectively.

The four direct disclosures of sexual abuse that occurred during the program presentation demonstrate the effect that talking about abuse can have on victims. These children spontaneously shared their abuse situations in the classroom after the topic and safety rules had been discussed. It is possible that they became aware of the abusive nature of their situation through the program's educational material. Intervention by the Certified Facilitator and school counsellor, in the form of abuse reporting to authorities as well as providing a safe and accepting space for the child occurred. The disclosure by the children allowed for intervention and support by the school counsellor that otherwise would not have been possible. It is possible that more students were victims but did not disclose directly during the lessons. Since there were several direct disclosures to the Certified Facilitator, it is important that all facilitators are trained in handling these situations. Responding to the child victim with support and sensitivity is critical, as is making the report to child protective services (McElvaney, 2015). In this study, the Certified Facilitator had developed a good working relationship with the school counsellors at the schools, and was able to work collaboratively to make the reports. Handling the disclosure in front of other children requires sensitivity in order to not traumatise the other students. It is a delicate balance of allowing the child to talk and be supported but not exposing the other children to details of the abuse.

The high pre-test scores and the small differences in pre-and post-test scores (the average increase was 0.46) may be attributed to the fact that the measure has only five questions. This may also suggest that there were some ceiling effects indicating that children already were familiar with the concepts and had prior prevention information. It is possible that they were exposed to programming in their schools or had learned this information at home. It is also possible that children may have been sensitized by the pre-test and talked about safety somewhere else or with other students prior to the second session and post-test. If this is the case, it could have important implications for understanding the high rates of victimisation in low-SES communities. Some have suggested that schools that offer safety programming are likely to emphasise safety and prevention in other ways as well (see Topping & Barron, 2009). But it would require more thorough discussion with school administrators and classroom teachers to determine what concepts are possibly covered in school and which concepts are novel. These authors argue that even a small increase in scores can have practical significance if it results in the child gaining a piece of knowledge not previously known. The medium effect size of the difference also supports the significance of the results.

Classroom teacher role

Given the role that classroom teachers play in the identification of abuse among students, this study sought to evaluate their reactions to the curriculum. In general, their feedback on the program was very positive. While not measured, the classroom teachers observed the facilitator deliver the program and could possibly benefit from observation of the communication style and ease with which the facilitator discussed difficult topics. Classroom teachers can identify children who appear to be victimised and in their role as mandatory reporters can intervene to help the child get needed intervention. They are also in a role to be supportive of children who disclose abuse and require training to handle potential disclosures of bullying and abuse.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations in the data analysis and implementation of the program. Many students spoke Spanish as their primary language and the program was translated by the Certified Facilitator but is not available in Spanish. (The CSM videos, bookmarks, handouts, knowledge test are only available in English). There were some translation difficulties. Additionally, some children spoke an indigenous language and thus were not able to benefit from the program as there were no modifications for program delivery for these children. It is possible that some of the students in two of the schools were exposed to the program two years in a row and this may have impacted their scores. Due to our inability to track students over years, we were unable to account for this. The assessment provided by CSM consists of only five questions, making it very brief and potentially not assessing all aspects of the program. There was also a range of times between the sessions due to scheduling difficulties in some schools based on state assessments, school holidays or outside events. Not all students were present for both the first and second lessons, so some attrition occurred and was unavoidable due to absences. Additionally, some questions had very high scores on pre-test, creating a ceiling effect. We collected very limited demographic information on children as a stipulation of the school board IRB approval, so we cannot make conclusions about the program with regard to specific ethnic groups or language speakers. The IRB was concerned about the privacy of the students and the sensitive nature of the curriculum. We were also unable to conduct follow-up assessments for knowledge maintenance.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study shows promising results of victimisation prevention knowledge learned in an ethnically diverse, low-income sample of students. Given the relatively small differences in scores on this short measure, future research should ensure that ceiling effects are avoided (Topping & Barron, 2009). In general, the program was rated positively by the classroom teachers and administrators, who desired the program to return each year in some schools. Challenges with implementation with non-English speaking students were encountered, but with a highly trained and competent bilingual facilitator, the program was able to be delivered. The disclosures of sexual abuse during the program were an unintended consequence that provided the opportunity for reporting and intervention and hopefully will result in treatment for the victims. Conducting a longitudinal study of children who have participated in CSM compared to those who have not and assessing levels of victimisation would be key to examining the potential role of CSM in prevention. Future longitudinal research can also examine students who have been exposed to the program over multiple years and the effects of repeated exposure of the curriculum on their knowledge level.

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