



# Seeking Help: How School Climate Influences Adolescents' Decision

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## Abstract

While peer victimization is a well-known problem in schools, research indicates that the majority of students do not seek help from school professionals. The present study investigates the relationship between multiple dimensions of school climate and adolescents' willingness to seek school-based help for peer victimization. The results of this study will highlight the most predictive aspects of a school's climate so that schools may offer more effective programming targeted at facilitating help-seeking behavior.

## Literature Review

- The U.S. Department of Education (2014) found that students ages 12 to 18 experienced about 1,364,900 incidents of victimization in 2012.
- Up to 64% of students do not seek school-based help following peer victimization (deLara, 2012).
- Students who confide in school professionals experience fewer internalizing and conduct problems, improved social-emotional outcomes, and stronger academic performance (Demaray & Malecki, 2014).
- Eliot et al. (2010) found that females are more willing to seek help than their male counterparts and that students become more reluctant to seek help as they age.

## Purpose

To determine which single dimension of school climate or combination of dimensions best predicts adolescents' willingness to seek help, as well as how gender and grade level influence this decision.

## Materials, Methods, & Procedure

### Participants:

- 583 Middle School students from western Wisconsin participated in this study.

### Demographics:

- Gender: 49.9% Male, 49.4% Female
- Grade level: 29.5% 6<sup>th</sup>, 37.9% 7<sup>th</sup>, 31.0% 8<sup>th</sup>

## Materials & Methods cont.

### Instrumentation:

- On a 5-point scale, students rated their perceptions of school climate across 7 dimensions using the Meriden School Climate Survey (MSCS-SV; Gage et al., 2014) and their likelihood of seeking school-based help using a series of peer victimization scenarios (See Table 1). Qualitative questions were also used to examine feelings of safety at school and help-seeking preferences.

Table 1: Help-Seeking Scenarios

<b>Scenario A:</b> Imagine another student is pushing you around the halls all the time (Aceves et al., 2010).
<b>Scenario B:</b> Imagine another student laughs at you and calls you names whenever he/she sees you in the hallway.
<b>Scenario C:</b> Imagine another student or group of students say you can't play with them at recess or sit with them at lunch.

## Results

- Multiple linear regressions revealed participants' responses on the MSCS-SV accounted for 22% of the variance in their average scenario ratings (adjusted  $R^2=.22$ ). However, this was much larger for females (adjusted  $R^2=.31$ ) than for males (adjusted  $R^2=.15$ ). See Table 2.
- Adult Support at School was a significant predictor for both females ( $B=.62$  (95% CI=.39-.85),  $p<.001$ ) and males ( $B=.62$  (95% CI=.38-.86),  $p<.001$ ). School Safety ( $B=.35$  (95% CI=.14-.57),  $p<.01$ ) and Academic Support at Home ( $B=.21$  (95% CI=.01-.42),  $p<.05$ ) were also significant for females. See Table 2.

Table 2: Gender Differences

	Male	Female
Adjusted $R^2$	.152	.309
Significant Predictors of Help-Seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult Support at School**</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult Support at School**</li> <li>School Safety**</li> <li>Academic Support at Home*</li> </ul>

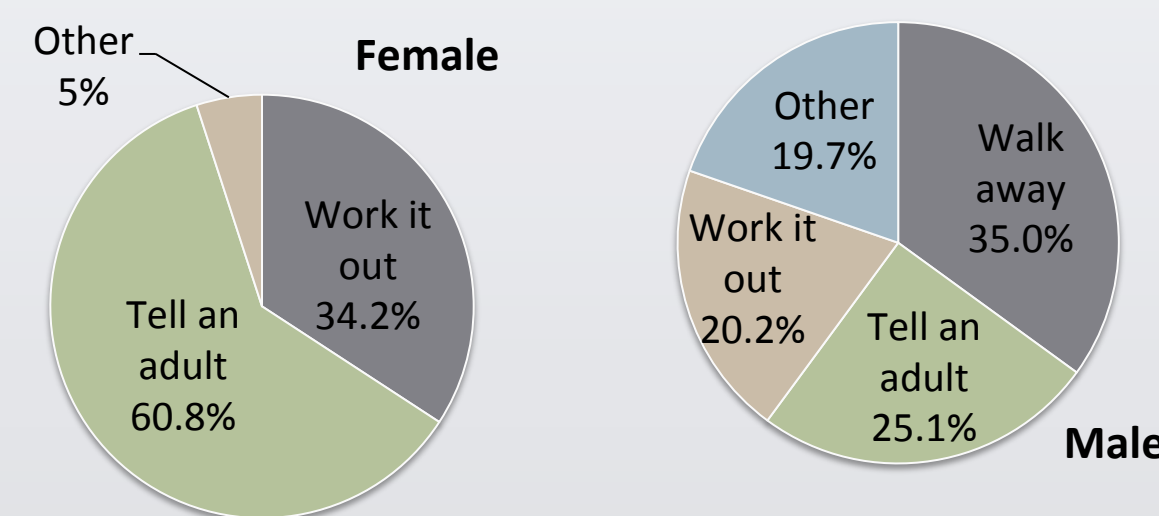
Note: \* =  $p<.05$ ; \*\* =  $p<.01$

## Results cont.

- Adult Support at School was the only significant predictor for the entire sample ( $B=.64$  (95% CI=.48-.81),  $p<.001$ ).

### Qualitative Data Top Answers

Q1: What do you normally do when you are having a problem with another student at school?



Q2: Who do you feel most comfortable talking to at school if you have a problem with someone or something? What about this person makes you choose him or her over someone else?

Friend: 45.8%	Teacher: 22.3%	Counselor: 21.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Won't tell anyone (27.6%)</li> <li>Make me feel better (23.0%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nonjudgmental, respectful, and nice (29.4%)</li> <li>Listens (16.0%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Won't tell anyone (27.1%)</li> <li>Tries to help or has helped in the past (16.9%)</li> </ul>

Q3: Overall, I feel safe/unsafe in my school. What about your school makes you feel this way?

Safe: 94.3%	Unsafe: 3.9%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trust teachers and staff to keep us safe (52.8%)</li> <li>My friends are here for me (18.7%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying is a problem here (36.4%)</li> <li>I don't trust others (27.3%)</li> </ul>

## Discussion

- Adult Support at School was found to be the only significant predictor of both male and female adolescents' willingness to seek school-based help for incidents of peer victimization.

## Discussion cont.

- School Safety and Academic Support at Home were also found to be significant for females, but not for males.
- Qualitative data revealed females to be more likely to tell an adult when faced with a problem, whereas males were found to be more likely to ignore the problem or walk away. However, students indicated they feel most comfortable talking to a close friend.
- Qualitative data also revealed that students' trust in teachers is most significant in helping them feel safe at school.

### Implications for School Psychologists:

- Because Adult Support at School was a significant predictor for both males and females, improve relationships between students and teachers/staff using evidence-based methods. This is especially important for males, as they were far less likely than females to report they would tell an adult.
- Since Academic Support at Home and School Safety were also significant for female students, advocate for increased family-school collaboration and the implementation of a school-wide PBIS system. This is also important for those students who reported feeling unsafe.
- Encourage students to seek help from school psychologists and school counselors by enhancing their awareness of mental health professionals in the school.

### Selected References

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