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### Be a buddy, not a bully?

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## The Support Group Approach in the Dutch KiVa anti-bullying program Effects on victimization, defending, and well-being at school\*

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In past decades bullying in schools has become a matter of serious concern. Bullying, commonly defined as repetitive and intentional abuse of others (Olweus, 1993), is a problem in almost all schools throughout the world (Salmivalli et al., 2012; Smith & Shu, 2000).

A wide range of research has substantiated that bullying is related to various forms of psychosocial maladjustment for all those involved (Ttofi et al., 2014). Victims of bullying suffer from mental and physical health issues, tend to be socially isolated and generally have a low level of well-being at school (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012; Reijntjes et al., 2010). Bullies are often rejected by their classmates and have an increased likelihood of dropout, problem drinking and unemployment later in life (e.g., Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000; Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). Children who witness bullying behavior are likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, feel less comfortable at school, and show social adjustment problems (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Rivers et al., 2009; Werth et al., 2015).

The growing awareness of the prevalence and the negative consequences of school bullying have amplified the need for effective interventions to tackle bullying. In many countries, including the Netherlands, schools are strongly encouraged to implement some form of anti-bullying program that provides both preventive and reactive measures to handle existing bullying situations school wide (Wienke et al., 2014). Generally a distinction between two reactive strategies can be made. On the one hand, there is the punitive approach which directly confronts and sanctions bullies for their behavior (Thompson & Smith, 2011). On the other hand, there is the non-punitive approach that involves problem-solving strategies, such as the Support Group Approach, the No Blame Method (Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998), and the Method of Shared Concern (Pikas 1989, 2002). The latter approaches are very similar (Garandeau, Poskiparta, et al., 2014) and aim to change the behavior of bullies and bystanders by increasing their discomfort and raising their awareness of the victims' suffering. Non-punitive strategies are considered key in reducing bullying and victimization (Young & Holdorf, 2003). In the Netherlands, experts prefer using non-punitive, problem-solving strategies above punitive strategies in anti-bullying interventions (Wienke et al., 2014). The Dutch implementation of the *KiVa anti-bullying program* (Veenstra et al., 2013) addresses pervasive bullying situations according to the Support Group Approach.

Although the Support Group Approach is widely used in several countries (Smith et al., 2007), little is known about its success in reducing bullying (Rigby, 2014). Evaluation of the support group intervention is difficult for several reasons.

First, reactive interventions are used when bullying situations occur, which means evaluations are ad-hoc and cannot easily be organized in advance (i.e., there is no pretest or control group). Second, there is a tendency to adjust the intervention to suit the needs of a specific situation. Consequently, little insight is obtained into the exact methods of application and comparability between interventions is relatively low. Third, most evaluations are based on victims' or teachers' self-reports and thus rely on subjective interpretations of outcomes (Rigby, 2014; Smith et al., 1994).

Relatively few studies have investigated the Support Group Approach: evaluating 30 cases, Smith and colleagues (1994) concluded that most participants felt that the situation had improved as there was less bullying. Teachers also felt that the bullying behavior was reduced. A study by Young (1998) revealed that in only 6% of 50 cases the victim reported continued bullying. A report on the efficacy of anti-bullying strategies in England (Thompson & Smith, 2011) stated that the Support Group Approach was effective in 75% of bullying situations, a higher success rate than other methods (Rigby, 2014).

The studies described above base their conclusions on short-term effects only, given that the victims and their teachers were asked about their experiences immediately after the intervention took place. Moreover, effects of the reactive strategies are not isolated from other, prevention-oriented, anti-bullying interventions that might be present in school. In the current study, we investigate the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach – as part of the Dutch KiVa program – in addressing pervasive bullying situations over the course of a school year. In order to examine the effects above and beyond those of KiVa, victims for whom a support group intervention was organized were matched with similar victims without a support group, using Coarsened Exact Matching (Iacus et al., 2011).

### **The KiVa anti-bullying program**

KiVa is an anti-bullying program developed in Finland (Salmivalli et al., 2010). It was evaluated in a randomized control trial in Finland during 2007-2009 and disseminated nationwide afterwards (Kärnä et al., 2013; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alanen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011). KiVa is currently being implemented and tested in several countries, including the Netherlands.

The KiVa program is predicated on the idea that bullying is a group phenomenon with different roles rather than an incident between a bully and its

victim. Research on participant roles in bullying showed that the behavior of bystanders, assisting the bully or defending the victim, is crucial to maintaining or solving bullying (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 1996). A positive change in the behavior of others is expected to reduce the social rewards gained by bullying and consequently the bullies' motivation to bully (Salmivalli et al., 2012). Hence, KiVa aims to encourage bystanders to take a clear stance against bullying and support the victim instead of assisting the bully. For that purpose, the program contains universal actions that target all students. The core of these universal actions is ten student lessons covering a wide range of themes (i.e., respect, group pressure, mechanisms and consequences of bullying). Additionally, there is a computer game on which children test their knowledge about bullying and enhance their defending skills (Poskiparta et al., 2012). The universal actions are principally aimed at preventing bullying (e.g., by encouraging victim-supportive behaviors) and raising awareness about group processes. For solving existing bullying situations the KiVa program includes indicated actions, which are the focus of this study.

### **Indicated actions in the Dutch KiVa program: the Support Group Approach**

Each KiVa school has a KiVa team consisting of at least three teachers or other school personnel. Members of the KiVa team are trained in addressing pervasive cases of bullying, using the Support Group Approach.

In line with the KiVa program, the Support Group Approach is based on the idea that bullying is a group phenomenon (Garandeau, Poskiparta, et al., 2014) and that others can alter the bullies' motivation to bully (Rigby, 2014; Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998). Instead of focusing only on (changing) the behavior of the bully, bystanders and defenders are also involved in tackling bullying situations. The purpose of the support group is not to punish or blame the bullies and their assistants, but to create mutual concern for the well-being of the victim. It is emphasized that everyone has to do something to help to improve the situation. In other words, the responsibility for solving the bullying is given to the support group. It is assumed that the shared distress will evoke empathy in bullies and that the "group pressure" or shared responsibility will trigger the bullies' willingness to alter their behavior. Assistants are expected to lose the excitement and arousal of watching bullying (Rigby, 2014; Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998).

## Discussion meetings

The Support Group Approach used in the Dutch KiVa program consists of a set of individual meetings with the victim and small group meetings with the support group. KiVa team members are asked to fill in reports after each discussion meeting.

Prior to the intervention, a screening procedure is conducted to ensure that bullying is indeed involved: an intentional and systematic abuse of power with negative consequences for the victim. When these criteria are met, in the first session a KiVa team member interviews the victim. Victims are asked to talk about what has been happening. They are supposed to name who is involved in the bullying and indicate who is likely to support them. During this session victims are informed about the follow-up procedure and assured that nobody will be punished.

After the first meeting a support group is formed. Preferably, the support group consists of 6-8 children, including bullies and their assistants, defenders or friends of the victim, and a few prosocial, high status peers. The victim is not included. It is important that there is a balance between students involved in the bullying and prosocial students. In the small group discussion, the bully is not apportioned blame. Instead, KiVa team members share their concern about the victim in order to raise empathy. All children in the support group are encouraged to make suggestions that could help the victim: *'I heard person X is having a hard time. What could you do to improve the situation?'*. At the end of the meeting the responsibility for providing practical support (e.g., helping with school tasks; trying to stop the bullying) and to make the victim more comfortable at school (e.g., greeting; playing together) is given to everyone present. After a week, two follow-up meetings – one for the victim and one for the support group – are held to see whether or not the situation has changed. If the situation has improved, the support group are complimented for their help and encouraged to continue their positive behavior. If no progress has been made, additional steps are discussed.

## The present study

Existing evaluations of the Support Group Approach provide us little information on the use of the intervention. Thompson and Smith (2011) state that around 10% of schools in England employ this strategy to solve bullying situations. However, there is no clear indication for which or how many victims a support group intervention is organized and what the support group looks like. The first objective of this study was therefore to gain insight into the use of the Support Group Approach in the

Dutch KiVa program. How often was a support group organized and for whom? What was the composition of the support group? Second, we wanted to investigate whether the victims' short-term evaluation of the intervention was as positive as found in other studies, in which almost all victims indicate that victimization had decreased or stopped (e.g., Rigby, 2014).

The third objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach over the course of a school year. Until the present research, various studies showed positive outcomes regarding the (perceived) change in victimization, but these conclusions were solely based on evaluation meetings soon after the intervention (e.g., Smith et al., 1994; Thompson & Smith, 2011, Young, 1998). It is, however, essential to investigate whether positive effects of the support group intervention are still visible at the end of the school year, so that stronger conclusions about its effectiveness can be drawn. Given that both the universal component of the KiVa program and the Support Group Approach aim to reduce victimization and enhance defending behavior, this study considered changes in victimization and defending. Another more indirect aim of the Support Group Approach is to improve the victims' well-being at school (i.e., support group members are asked to make the victim feel more comfortable at school). Hence, we also investigated the changes concerning the victims' well-being at school. This way can provide an overall image of the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach rather than just focusing on the reduction of bullying.

We expected that victims for whom a support group was organized would be (1) less victimized and (2) more defended at the end of the school year than victims for whom no support group was organized. Additionally, we expected them to have (3) higher well-being at school in comparison with victims without a support group intervention.

## METHOD

### Sample

Data used in this study stem from the evaluation of the Dutch implementation of the KiVa anti-bullying program. To recruit schools, letters describing the KiVa project were sent in the fall of 2011 to all 6,938 Dutch elementary schools. Special elementary schools and schools for children with special educational needs could not take part in the KiVa program and were thus not invited to participate. A total of 99 schools indicated they were willing to participate.



Prior to the pre-assessment in May 2012 – and for new students prior to the other assessments – schools sent information on the study to students' parents. If parents did not want their child to participate in the assessment, they were asked to inform the teacher. Students were informed at school about the research and gave oral consent. Both parents and students could withdraw from participation at any time.

When the pre-assessment was finished, schools were randomly assigned by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) to either the control condition (33 schools) or one of the two intervention conditions (34 schools KiVa intervention and 32 schools KiVa+ intervention). KiVa+ is the KiVa program with one additional component. Teachers in KiVa+ schools receive reports about the social structure of their classroom. Control schools were asked to continue their “care as usual” anti-bullying approach until their participation in the KiVa program in June 2014.

## **Procedure**

Students filled out online questionnaires on the schools' computers during regular school hours. These questionnaires were developed for the evaluation of the KiVa program in Finland (Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Alanen, et al., 2011; Kärnä, Voeten, Little, Poskiparta, Kaljonen, et al., 2011) and adapted to the Dutch situation. Classroom teachers distributed individual passwords that gave access to the questionnaire. The order of questions and scales used in this study were randomized in such a way that the order of presentation would not have any systematic effect on the results. Students read all questions by themselves; difficult topics were explained in instructional videos. In these videos a professional actor explained the questions in such a way that all students could understand them (talking slowly and articulating words clearly). The term bullying was defined in the way formulated in Olweus' Bully/Victim questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). Several examples covering different forms of bullying were given, followed by an explanation emphasizing the intentional and repetitive nature of bullying and the power imbalance. Classroom teachers were present to answer questions and assist students when necessary. Teachers were supplied with detailed instructions before data collection began and were encouraged to help students in such a way that it would not affect their answers (e.g., asking them questions such as “Which words are unclear to you?”).

During the process of the Support Group Approach KiVa team members were asked to fill in a report form for each meeting. On the basis of these forms we could derive information about the victimization, composition of the support group, arrangements that were made, and the victim's perceived effectiveness.

### Participants

The present study used data collected over two school years from schools in the intervention conditions, in October 2012 and 2013, and in May 2013 and 2014. In this period, the Support Group Approach was used for 56 victims in 28 schools. This target sample consisted of 30 girls (53.6%) and 26 boys (46.4%) in grades 2-6 (age range: 7-12;  $M_{age} = 9.15$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.23$ ). In five of the cases there was missing information on one of the outcome variables. Moreover, 13 students had indicated not being victimized in October. For these students no baseline information about the level of bullying and defending was provided. Hence, they were excluded from the analyses. The sample used in the analyses consisted of 38 victims (44.7% boys,  $M_{age} = 9.24$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.20$ ).

### Measures

In the follow-up meeting, the KiVa team member asked the victim to say if the bullying situation had changed, and choose the best-fitting option from the following: the victimization has increased (0); the victimization had remained the same (1); the victimization has decreased (2); and the victimization has completely stopped (3). We used this information to construct a variable indicating the *victim's evaluation* of effectiveness in the short term.

During online data collection, students were asked to nominate peers by whom they were victimized. These nominations could be given to both classmates and students from other classes. Peer nominations are widely used in bullying research (e.g., Huitsing, Snijders, Van Duijn, & Veenstra, 2014; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011; Veenstra et al., 2005; Verlinden et al., 2014) and are acknowledged as reliable and valid. To measure the *change in the level of victimization* in one school year, for each victim the number of bully nominations given in October were summed and subtracted from the total bully nominations given in May. This created a score for each victim indicating whether victimization increased (0), remained the same (1), decreased (2), or completely stopped (3).

A score indicating the change in the *frequency of victimization* was based on the revised Olweus' Bully/Victim questionnaire (1996). Students were asked to indicate how often they were victimized in the past months (0 = did not happen, 1 = once or twice, 2 = two or three times a month, 3 = about once a week, 4 = several times a week). We calculated a difference score by subtracting the frequency of victimization in May from the frequency of victimization in October. A positive score indicates improvement in the victim's situation, that is, a decrease in the frequency of victimization.

In addition to nominating their bullies, students who indicated that they were victimized were asked to nominate their defenders. Again, nominations could be given to both classmates and students from other classes. Based on the difference in the total nominations given in October and May, an indicator for the *change in defending* was created for each student. Scores varied from defending completely stopped (0) to defending increased (3).

*Well-being at school* was indicated by seven items concerning the perception of the classroom and school (Kärnä et al. 2011). Students responded to items such as "I feel accepted as I am at school" (1 = never, 4 = always). The items formed an internally consistent scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$  in October;  $.86$  in May) and were averaged. We calculated a difference score by subtracting self-reported well-being in May from October. A positive score indicates an increase in the student's well-being at school.

### **Matching variables**

A match was made on five victim characteristics expected to influence changes in victimization, defending, and well-being at school, that is: frequency of victimization, the students' level of depression and well-being at school, gender, and grade. For the analytical procedure, we had to create groups with discrete values (Iacus et al., 2011). *Frequency of victimization* was measured using the revised Olweus' Bully/Victim questionnaire (1996) as described previously.

Students' psychosocial well-being was indicated by their levels of *depressive symptoms* and *well-being at school* in October. We used the adjusted Major Depression Disorder Scale (Chorpita et al., 2000) to measure the emergence of depressive symptoms. Students' answers on the nine items (e.g., "I feel worthless") could vary from never (1) to always (4). Together, the items formed an internally consistent scale and were averaged (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ). Well-being at school was indicated by students' self-reported well-being (see description above). Both

indicators for psychosocial well-being were coded into three groups, based on quartiles.

Lastly, *grade* (range 2-6; Dutch grades: 4-8) and *gender* (0 = girl; 1 = boy) were included as matching variables. Table 3.1 presents descriptive information on the study variables.

**Table 3.1**

*Descriptive information on the study variables (weighted)*

	Min	Max	No support group			Support group		
			Mean	SD	%	Mean	SD	%
Victim's evaluation <sup>a</sup>	0	3				2.13	0.66	
Change in victimization								
Increased					24.2			31.6
Remained the same					8.2			7.9
Decreased					26.8			34.2
Stopped					40.8			26.3
Change in frequency of victimization	-4	4	1.24	1.59		0.26	1.62	
Change in defending								
Stopped					26.3			10.5
Decreased					28.2			26.3
Remained the same					10.8			10.5
Increased					34.7			52.6
Change in well-being at school	-1.57	2.57	0.22	0.61		0.00	0.72	
<i>Matching variables</i>								
Sex (1=boy)					44.7			44.7
Grade	4	6	4.16	1.11		4.16	1.13	
Frequency victimization in October	1	4	2.92	1.42		2.92	1.44	
Depressive symptoms in October								
Low					5.3			5.3
Medium					44.7			44.7
High					50.0			50.0
Well-being at school in October								
Low					73.7			73.7
Medium					21.1			21.1
High					5.3			5.3
<i>N</i>					571		38	

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> This was only asked of victims who received a support group intervention

## Analytical strategy

Victims for whom a support group was organized were statistically matched to victims who did not receive a support group. Matching is a nonparametric method that aims to balance the distribution of covariates in the treated and control group (Iacus et al., 2011; Stuart, 2010). The Coarsened Exact Matching procedure ensures that only respondents with identical scores on the covariates (e.g., age, gender, level of victimization, well-being) are matched. This provides a better comparison of victims with and victims without a support group intervention as it controls for bias in the context (Iacus et al., 2011) and allows us to test the impact of the Support Group Approach on changes in victimization, defending, and the victims' well-being at school.

The matching procedure was conducted in SPSS 20, using the Python plug-in and CEM software (Iacus et al., 2009). Respondents without an exact match were removed from the analyses, leading to a sample of 38 victims for whom a support group was organized and a control group of 571 victims for whom no support group was held. There were 30 sets of respondents (strata), indicating that a stratum existed of at least one victim with a support group (range per stratum: 1 - 4) and often several victims without a support group (range per stratum: 1 - 54). The multivariate imbalance  $\lambda_1$  was 0 and the Local Common Support was 100, which implies that only exact matches were indeed included (Iacus et al., 2009).

We examined whether the changes in victimization, defending, and well-being at school differed between victims with and without a support group. As two dependent variables were measured on an ordinal scale and the other dependent variables were not normally distributed, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed on 30 sets of respondents.

## RESULTS

### The use of the Support Group Approach in the Dutch KiVa program

Support group interventions were organized in 28 of 66 KiVa schools. Descriptive analyses of the completed reports showed a mean number of 2 ( $SD= 1.31$ ) support group interventions per school, ranging from 1 to 6. The average size of the support group was 5.96 members ( $SD = 0.13$ ; range: 3-8). Most support groups contained students from the same class (76.8%), both boys and girls (71.4%). Students in the same grade showed a slight majority (57.1%). However, in multi-grade classrooms, which are common in the Netherlands, this was in only 20.7% of the cases. Victims

reported to have on average 5.69 bullies and 3.05 defenders. Most cases, the support group contained two bullies (34.3%) and two defenders (42.4%). The majority of the support groups included at least one friend of the victim (76.9%). The chronicity of the victimization varied across the cases. Most victims indicated that they were victimized for more than a year (33.9%). However, other victims had been victimized for only one or two weeks (21.4%).

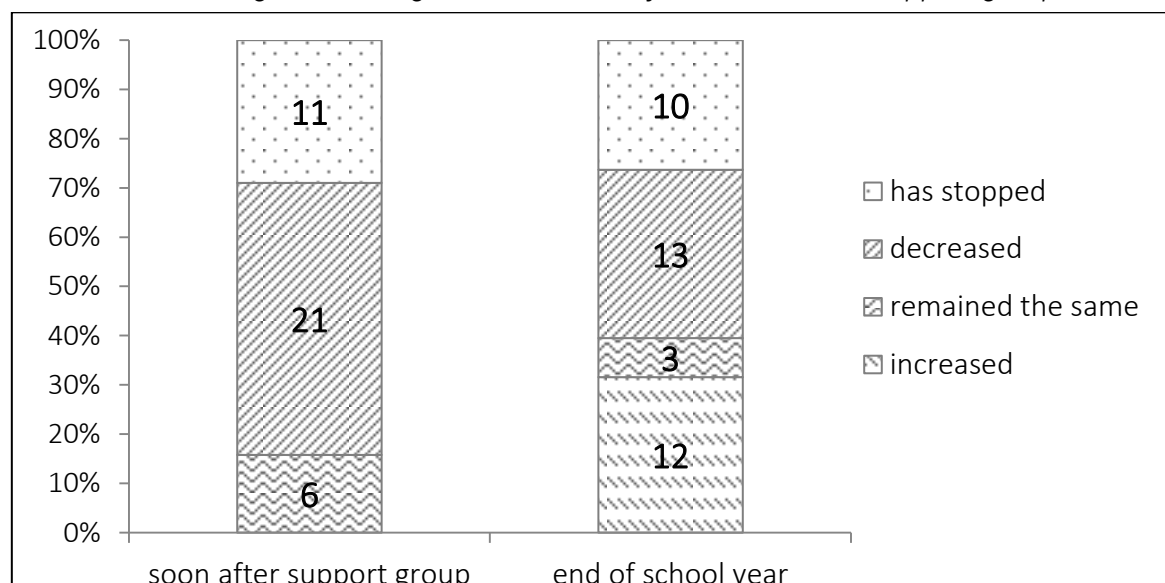
### Short-term versus long-term changes in victimization

Figure 3 shows that in short-term evaluations victims were very positive about the effect of the Support Group Approach as a majority indicated that the bullying situation had improved in the past two weeks. In 11 out of the 38 cases, victims reported that the victimization had stopped, in 21 that it had decreased and in only six cases there was no change in the bullying situation. No one reported that the victimization had increased after the Support Group Approach.

Figure 3 also shows that at the end of the school year, long-term evaluations were different from the short-term evaluation. In May, ten victims for whom a support group was organized reported that victimization stopped and in 13 cases victimization decreased. However, three victims indicated that the situation stayed the same and for 12 victims the situation was worse. On average, victims were significantly more positive about the change in their bullying situation soon after the support group was organized than in the longer term ( $M_{dif}=0.58$ ,  $z(38) = -2.71$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

**Figure 3**

*Short-term and long-term change in victimization for victims with a support group*



## The effectiveness of the Support Group Approach

Changes in victimization, defending, and well-being at school for victims receiving support group intervention were compared with the situation for victims without support group intervention. Results are presented in Table 3.2: mean and median scores of both groups indicated that the number of bullies tends to remain the same over time. There was no difference between victims with a support group and victims without a support group ( $z = -0.03$ ;  $p = .49$ ). In contrast, a significant difference concerning change in frequency of victimization was found ( $z = -3.27$ ;  $p = .00$ ). The outcome revealed that for victims not involved in a support group intervention the frequency of victimization decreased ( $M = 1.01$ ;  $Mdn = 1.44$ ), whereas no substantial change was found for victims with a support group ( $M = 0.15$   $Mdn = 0$ ). The findings did not support our hypothesis that victims with a support group would be less victimized at the end of the school year than victims not involved in a support group intervention.

As regards defending, the results showed that victims with a support group had more defenders at the end of the school year than victims without a support group. The difference is significant ( $z = -2.39$ ;  $p = .01$ ). Hence, it appears that a support group is beneficial for victims in terms of being defended. This is in line with what we expected.

Table 3.2 also shows the results with regard to the victims' well-being at school. For both groups, there were only small changes in well-being over the course of a school year ( $M = .19 / -.02$ ;  $Mdn = .20 / .07$  for victims without and with a support group, respectively). The difference was not considered statistically significant ( $z = -1.58$ ;  $p = .06$ ), which implies that the findings reject our hypothesis that the Support Group Approach would benefit victims' well-being at school.

In short, the results point out that victims tend to report an improvement in the bullying situation in the short term, but this decrease did not continue throughout the school year as by the end no changes in either level or frequency of victimization were found. Moreover, the findings showed an additional effect of the support group intervention on changes in defending over and beyond the school-wide KiVa intervention, but this was not the case for victimization or the victims' well-being at school.

**Table 3.2***Changes in victimization, defending, and well-being at school*

	No support group		Support group		Z	P*	Effect size
	Mean (SD)	Median	Mean (SD)	Median			
Victimization	1.84 (0.58)	1.96	1.71 (1.12)	2.00	-0.03 <sup>a</sup>	.49	.00
Frequency of victimization	1.11 (1.01)	1.44	0.15 (1.58)	0.00	-3.27 <sup>a</sup>	.00	.42
Defending	1.53 (0.58)	1.49	2.08 (1.01)	2.36	-2.39 <sup>b</sup>	.01	.31
Well-being at school	0.19 (0.31)	0.20	-0.02 (0.72)	0.07	-1.58 <sup>a</sup>	.06	.20

Note. <sup>a</sup> based on positive ranks, <sup>b</sup> based on negative ranks, \* one-sided N = 30 strata

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the Support Group Approach as part of the Dutch implementation of the KiVa anti-bullying program. Although the Support Group Approach is widely used as an anti-bullying intervention and recommended by local authorities (Smith et al., 2007; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Young & Holdorf, 2003), relatively little is known about its successfulness. Previous studies focused on its short-term effects, often based on the evaluation meeting held two weeks after the intervention starts. It found that a majority of students or teachers reported that the support group intervention was effective in tackling bullying situations. However, it is often not known whether similar effects would be obtained if no support group intervention was used (see Rigby, 2014). Moreover, existing research merely focuses on changes in the bullying situation, whereas the Support Group Approach (implicitly) aims to increase victim-supportive behavior and enhance the well-being of victims (Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998).

We argued that it is important to see if the Support Group Approach is still beneficial in the longer term as well, above and beyond proactive anti-bullying strategies. We therefore examined its effectiveness in terms of changes in victimization, defending, and the victims' well-being at school over the course of a school year. To control for changes in the victims' situation caused by the effects of universal actions within the KiVa program, victims receiving support group intervention were matched to similar victims who did not have a support group



(Iacus et al., 2011). This way gained insight into the unique contribution of the Support Group Approach in longer term changes to the victims' situation.

In line with previous research (e.g., Rigby, 2014; Smith et al., 1994; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Young, 1998) we found that victims with a support group intervention were positive about changes in the bullying situation in the short term. Most victims indicated at the evaluation meeting that the victimization had decreased or stopped. However, by the end of the school year outcomes were less encouraging: almost 40% of the victims indicated that the victimization had not altered or had even worsened compared with their situation in October. It thus appears that the (perceived) effectiveness of the intervention is not lasting.

We hypothesized that the Support Group Approach would be beneficial for victims in terms of victimization, defending, and well-being at school. Specifically, we expected that by the end of the school year victims who received support group intervention would be less victimized, more defended, and feel more comfortable at school than similar victims without a support group. With regard to the victim's bullying situation we found no significant differences for change in the level of victimization between the two groups. For both victims with and without a support group, the victimization tended to remain the same over the course of the school year. However, the frequency of victimization was found to decrease more for victims without a support group than for those victims who received a support group intervention.

As regards the victim's well-being at school our outcomes reveal that victims do not benefit from a support group in terms of feeling more comfortable at school. A possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that the Support Group Approach only makes the victims feel more comfortable at school during the intervention period and this effect fades over time. Victims with a support group could for that reason be more likely to report a decrease in their well-being, as they probably felt better in the intervention period. Unfortunately, with our data we were could not test short-term effects concerning the victim's well-being at school.

In contrast, outcomes in relation to defending were as expected. Victims for whom a support group intervention was organized reported having more defenders (i.e., an increase in defending) at the end of the school year than victims without a support group. Regardless of whether this increase in defending is due to more stable victimization, this is an important finding given that previous research has shown that being defended relates to higher self-esteem and higher peer status than undefended ones (Sainio et al., 2011).

In sum, we can conclude that despite the fact that in the short term victims were positive about the changes in the bullying situation, the Support Group Approach was only successful in enhancing defending behavior over the course of a school year. This might imply that prosocial students especially are affected by the intervention as the success rate concerning the resolution of victimization seems to fade over time and tends even to worsen the victim's situation. These findings offer a more nuanced view to prior evaluations, which considered the Support Group Approach an effective anti-bullying strategy (Rigby, 2014; Smith et al., 1994; Thompson & Smith, 2011; Young, 1998) and underline the importance of evaluating anti-bullying interventions over a longer duration given that positive changes may disappear over time.

### Limitations and directions for future studies

The outcomes of the current study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, the sample size was small. Although the Support Group Approach is a standard component of the Dutch KiVa program, it is used only for a small minority of the victims. This low usage of indicated actions in targeting bullying is a source of concern. Possibly the school staff do not want to use the Support Group Approach and try to solve bullying situations in other ways. Another possibility is that a high number of victims go unrecognized by parents, classroom teachers, and the KiVa team. This would be in line with the Finnish evaluation of the KiVa program, which found that only 23.5% of the structural victims received targeted intervention (Haataja, Sainio, Turtonen, & Salmivalli, 2015). It also is possible that the support group intervention was used, but the KiVa team did not fill in the reports or did not send them back. Thus our "without support group sample" might also contain victims who actually received a support group intervention. In other words, the reported differences between the two groups in this study might be overestimated. Future studies would develop knowledge if they use large-scale randomized control trials with schools that implement all program components (i.e., preventive and reactive strategies) versus schools that implement only preventive strategies. Such studies should also examine whether fidelity to the intervention plays a role.

A second limitation concerns the use of different methods in establishing the short- and long-term effectiveness related to changes in victimization. The short-term effect derives from a personal interview during the support group intervention when the victim indicates whether their bullying situation has changed. The long-term effect is based on information derived from questionnaires that are filled out

anonymously. There is a chance that victims were prone to report an improvement at the follow-up meeting either to please the KiVa team or to discontinue an intervention they perceived ineffective (see also Garandeanu, Poskiparta, et al., 2014). This social desirability bias might have caused an overestimation of the difference between the changes in victimization in the short and long term. In future studies, it would be useful to have information from several informants (e.g., classroom teachers, classmates, KiVa team members) so that changes in the victim's situation can be studied from a range of perspectives.

Although we could distinguish short-term from long-term effects with regard to changes in victimization, we have little insight into what happens during the intervention itself. Data about the experiences of the victim and support group members should be collected on a frequent basis (e.g., diary studies). This would obtain more insight into the process of the Support Group Approach and would detect possible relapses in the victim's situation earlier.

Lastly, our study appears to show that the support group intervention benefits some victims more than others. Future research should examine these differences in effectiveness thoroughly. It might be that the Support Group Approach is only successful among certain victims, in tackling specific forms of bullying, or in classrooms with strong anti-bullying norms (e.g., Rigby, 2014; Thompson & Smith, 2011). For instance, it is likely that the support group intervention will be less effective for victims with limited social skills or communication difficulties. Moreover, it has been found that bystanders' feelings of empathy differ across the various forms of bullying (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Tapper & Boulton, 2005; Werth et al., 2015). Another possibility is that the composition of the support group plays a role. The founders of the Support Group Approach emphasize that the composition of the support group is important. Ideally, the support group includes bullies, their assistants and prosocial peers who are likely to help the victim (Robinson & Maines, 2008; Young, 1998). Up to now, little has been known about the composition of support groups. Can victims and practitioners indicate potential defenders? And are all (prosocial) bystanders competent to help their victimized classmates? Future evaluations would benefit from investigating the social position and characteristics of support group members and their consequences regarding the effectiveness of the intervention.

### Practical implications

Our results suggest that only for a few victims a support group intervention is organized. It is important that victims are recognized as such by school personnel. Teachers would be helped by feedback reports on students who are structurally victimized, have a low sense of well-being at school and/or are highly disliked by their peers. Such feedback reports may be extended by suggestions for the composition of the support group or indicated actions that could be undertaken. In addition, students should be trained in identifying victimization and practice prosocial strategies for tackling (pervasive) bullying situations. This way, both school staff and students might be better prepared to improve the victim's situation.

