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**Once Upon a Time...:**

**Using fairy tales as a form of vicarious contact to prevent bullying among  
schoolchildren**

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**Data availability statement**

The data sata is available at the following link: <https://osf.io/rmn9k/>

**Conflict of interest disclosure**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Once Upon a Time...: Using fairy tales as a form of vicarious contact  
to prevent stigma-based bullying among schoolchildren**

We conducted a vicarious contact intervention with the aim of promoting bystanders' intentions to react to stigma-based bullying among schoolchildren. Participants were Italian primary schoolchildren ( $N = 117$  first to third graders); the outgroup was represented by foreign children. Vicarious contact was operationalized with story reading, creating fairy tales on stigma-based bullying where minority characters were bullied by majority characters. Once a week for three weeks, participants were read fairy tales in small groups by an experimenter and engaged in reinforcing activities. Results revealed that the intervention increased intergroup empathy (but not intergroup perspective-taking) and anti-bullying peer norms, and fostered contact intentions. The intervention also had indirect effects via intergroup empathy on helping and contact intentions and on bystanders' reactions to stigma based-bullying. We discuss theoretical and practical implications, also in terms of the relevance of the present results for school policy. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

*Keywords:* vicarious contact, indirect contact, stigma-based bullying, intergroup empathy, children, intergroup relations.

## VICARIOUS CONTACT AND STIGMA-BASED BULLYING

Psychological research has shown that individuals from minority groups suffer from discrimination experiences that impact upon their well-being and more generally their quality of life (Benner et al., 2018; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). A special form of discrimination is represented by stigma-based bullying. Stigma-based bullying refers to bullying targeting people because they belong to a stigmatized group, beyond individual characteristics, for instance because of ethnicity or sexual orientation (NASEM, 2016). It is qualitatively different from interpersonal bullying, that is bullying not experienced because of group membership (Mulvey, Hoffman, Gönültaş, Hope, & Cooper, 2018), and it can compromise the health of young people to a greater extent than interpersonal bullying (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Stigma-based bullying represents a specific phenomenon: it is distinct from single acts of discrimination, since it shares with interpersonal bullying the repetition of discriminatory behavior; and at the same time it differs from interpersonal bullying, since it is characterized by power imbalance between the perpetrator's and the victim's groups (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Despite the severe consequences for victims of stigma-based bullying (Killen, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013), interventions aimed to fight this phenomenon are surprisingly rare (Earnshaw et al., 2018).

In this article, we tested for the first time vicarious contact as a tool that can counteract stigma-based bullying. We conducted an experimental intervention among first- to third-grade Italian schoolchildren, using foreign children as the outgroup. To attract children's interest, vicarious contact was operationalized as fairy tales dealing with the issue of stigma-based bullying. Dependent variables focused on bystanders' reaction to name-calling and exclusionary behavior, that are two common forms of bullying (Aboud & Joong, 2008; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007;

Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). We also investigated underlying processes, focusing on mediators of vicarious contact that may be relevant to stigma-based bullying, and specifically on intergroup perspective-taking, intergroup empathy, and social (peer) norms.

### **Contrasting stigma-based bullying**

Bullying is a powerful and widespread worldwide phenomenon that negatively impacts upon young children (UNESCO, 2019), with serious short- and long-term consequences for their health (e.g., Hong & Espelage, 2012). However, bullying can also be experienced at the group level. Stigma-based bullying is generally perpetrated by high-status majority groups, and may worsen well-being to an even greater extent than interpersonal bullying (Killen et al., 2013). For instance, victims of stigma-based bullying are more likely (compared with victims of interpersonal bullying) to suffer from poorer mental health (Russell et al., 2012). It also has other detrimental consequences, like stigmatizing attitudes toward outgroup members, social exclusion, low academic achievement, substance use (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Palmer & Abbott, 2014; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Social stressors have harmful consequences especially when experienced during specific stages of development, like childhood (Gee, Walsemann, & Brondolo, 2012). The negative consequences of stigma-based bullying may therefore be especially severe in this age group.

Although there is a wide literature on interventions targeting bullying (Evans, Fraser, & Cotter, 2014; Jiménez-Barbero, Ruiz-Hernández, Llor-Zaragoza, Pérez-García, & Llor-Esteban, 2016), much less work has been done to reduce *stigma-based* bullying. In their systematic review, Earnshaw et al. (2018) were able to identify only 21 interventions targeting stigma-based bullying. Most of these targeted children aged

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11 years or older, and only two focused on race-ethnic stigma. Interestingly, a substantial portion of studies did not follow any specific guiding framework, while others focused on social and emotional learning, or on providing participants with social skills and different types of competencies. Interventions were characterized by heterogeneity, with several interventions relying on different theoretical frameworks.

Various authors noted that stigma-based bullying lies at the convergence between the constructs of bullying and prejudice/group-based discrimination (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Therefore, interventions that have been shown to be effective in reducing prejudice might be specifically tailored to address the issue of stigma-based bullying. One such type of intervention is based on intergroup contact, resting on the notion that positive contact between groups can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954). There is preliminary evidence that contact can be used against stigma-based bullying. For instance, Abbott and Cameron (2014) found in a correlational study with early adolescents aged 11-13 years that contact predicted assertive behavior against name-calling toward an immigrant person (for additional cross-sectional evidence, see Dessel, Goodman, & Woodford, 2017; Palmer, Cameron, Rutland, & Blake, 2017). Earnshaw et al. (2018) identified only three interventions based on intergroup contact (although none of them addressed children aged 10 years or younger). One was focused on teachers rather than students (Dessel, 2010). In another intervention targeting bullying against disability (Mpofu, 2003), contact was based on a high imbalance between the number of members of the majority and the minority group. Finally, Gómez, Munte, and Sorde (2014) presented two case studies where children from majority or minority groups and adults from minority groups (Roma and Arab-Muslims) worked together during class activities (thus qualifying more as an intervention on role

modeling than on intergroup contact). As can be seen, none of these interventions investigated reactions to bullying by bystanders, but generally focused on variables commonly used in contact research such as social acceptance, outgroup attitudes, and stereotypes.

It is likely that the paucity of contact studies is due to the difficulty of implementing contact in the field. We propose that vicarious contact can overcome this limitation. Specifically, we aim to address these two gaps of research, by conducting for the first time a vicarious contact intervention to fight stigma-based bullying, focusing on how to foster bystanders' reactions.

### **Vicarious contact**

There is ample evidence showing that direct, face-to-face intergroup contact can improve intergroup relations among both adults and children (Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). However, direct contact may often be impractical. For instance, it cannot be used in segregated contexts, or where the imbalance between majority and minority groups does not allow proper opportunities for close contact for majority group members (see Mpofu, 2003, for an example related to stigma-based bullying). Therefore, researchers have started investigating indirect contact, that is contact that is not face-to-face, as a practical, non-costly, and effective way to improve intergroup relations. There is now a consistent body of evidence showing that indirect contact interventions, mostly conducted in educational settings, can reduce prejudice (Di Bernardo, Vezzali, Stathi, Cadamuro, & Cortesi, 2017; Turner & Cameron, 2016). Amongst indirect contact forms, one that has been shown to be especially effective is represented by vicarious contact (Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, &

Ropp, 1997). Vezzali and Stathi (2021) recently defined vicarious contact as ‘the observation of one or more interactions between ingroup and outgroup members, which can vary in degree of closeness between observed individuals and valence of the contact experience’ (p. 35).

Vicarious contact has mostly been operationalized in educational contexts by means of story reading (Liebkind & McAlister, 1999). In a series of interventions targeting primary schoolchildren, Cameron and colleagues (e.g., Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011) created ad-hoc stories based on children books. In the stories, considering different intergroup relations (e.g., host national vs. refugees, children with or without disability), characters belonging to the ingroup interacted positively and became friends with outgroup characters. Stories were typically read by experimenters in small groups of children throughout multiple sessions. Results revealed that vicarious contact improved outgroup attitudes and fostered intentions to have contact with outgroup members (for additional evidence, see Cocco et al., 2021; Husnu, Mertan, & Cicek, 2018; Mäkinen, Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lathi, & Renvik, 2019; McKeown, Williams, & Pauker, 2017). None of these interventions however focused on stigma-based bullying.

Preliminary evidence for the role of indirect contact in reducing stigma-based bullying has been provided by Vezzali et al. (2020). They focused on a further type of indirect contact and specifically on imagined contact, consisting in the mental simulation of positive interaction with a member of the outgroup (Crisp & Turner, 2012). In their study, primary schoolchildren took part in a three-week intervention. Each week they were asked to imagine that a newly formed imagined contact friend belonging to the outgroup (i.e. children with disability) had been bullied by a peer, and



how they would react. Results of a questionnaire administered one week after the last intervention session revealed that inclusion of the other in the self mediated the indirect effect of the intervention on greater bystanders' reactions.

In the present study, we conducted an intervention that significantly deviates from Vezzali et al.'s (2020) study, extending its conclusions. First, we considered a different target outgroup (i.e. foreign children). Second, we conducted for the first time a vicarious contact intervention, adapting it to the specificity of stigma-based bullying. The choice to focus on vicarious contact is that, by depicting non only dyadic interactions (like imagined contact generally does) but more complex social situations including peers, it may allow to take advantage of relevant psychological processes related to the group (e.g., social peer norms), which have been shown to have a key role in reducing stigma-based bullying (Jones, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2011). In this study, we focus simultaneously on two qualitatively different types of mediators: intergroup empathy and intergroup perspective-taking, two individual-level variables which have been traditionally associated with bullying reduction; and peer norms, which refer to the group rather than to the individual. Below we provide the theoretical rationale for these two mediators.

### **Mediators of vicarious contact**

In proposing the extended contact hypothesis, based on the idea that knowing about or watching positive interactions between ingroup and outgroup members reduces prejudice (later differentiated into extended contact – knowing about intergroup interactions – and vicarious contact – watching intergroup interactions; Vezzali et al., 2014), Wright et al. (1997) hypothesized four mediating processes: inclusion of the other in the self, ingroup and outgroup social norms, and intergroup anxiety. Research

has now provided consistent evidence for these mechanisms as mediators of (extended and) vicarious contact (for a review, see Vezzali et al., 2014). In addition, several other mediators of vicarious contact have been identified, like intergroup perspective-taking (Vezzali et al., 2015) and intergroup empathy (Cocco et al., 2021). We believe that three of these mediators are especially relevant for stigma-based bullying; intergroup empathy, intergroup perspective-taking, (ingroup) social norms (which we operationalized as peer norms).

There is evidence that perspective-taking and empathy can help to prevent bullying. For instance, Caravita, Di Biasio, and Salmivalli (2009) found that these two variables were associated with increased intentions to defend victims of bullying in a sample of primary and secondary school students (see also Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010; Van der Ploeg, Kretschmer, Salmivalli, & Veenstra, 2017; for a meta-analysis, see Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). Two correlational studies provided preliminary evidence that intergroup empathy can mediate the effects of direct contact (Abbott & Cameron, 2014) and extended contact (Antonio, Guerra, & Moleiro, 2017) on defending behavior in favor of stigma-based bullying victims.

With respect to social norms, there is now consensus that bullying (and stigma-based bullying) can be intended as a group phenomenon, with the group(s) and the social context playing a relevant part in it (Jones, Livingstone, & Manstead, 2017). For example, perpetration of bullying by peers (indicative of group norms) was associated with less willingness to intervene (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012), and involvement in bullying episodes was more likely when group norms supported bullying (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). In contrast, when the norm is against bullying, bystanders are more likely to display defending behavior (Lucas-Molina, Gimenez-Dasi, Fonseca-Pedrero, &

Perez-Albeniz, 2018). Similar conclusions were obtained when examining stigma-based bullying, with children displaying greater support of bullying behavior with pro-bullying social norms (Brenick & Romano, 2016; Jones et al., 2011), and lower intentions to bully an outgroup member with an anti-bullying social norm (Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, Kiesner, & Griffiths, 2008). Palmer, Rutland, and Cameron (2015), using a sample of children aged 8-15 years, provided direct evidence that a perceived norm mediated the effects of age on intentions to intervene to stop bullying. We aim to test whether social peer norms are also associated with bystander intentions in stigma-based bullying, and whether they mediate the effects of vicarious contact.

### **The present research**

We conducted an experimental field intervention with the aim of investigating whether vicarious contact is an effective strategy to counteract stigma-based bullying, promoting bystanders' intentions to react to bullying behaviors. We also tested intergroup perspective-taking, intergroup empathy, and peer norms as potential mediators. Participants were Italian primary schoolchildren; the outgroup was represented by foreign children. The choice to consider this intergroup relation lies in the high percentage of foreign people in the region where data were collected (Lombardia, 11.46%) compared with the rest of Italy (8.46%), also when considering foreign children enrolled in primary schools (16.85% in Lombardia vs. 11.45% in Italy; Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2021). Given the often problematic relationship between Italians and foreign people also in educational contexts (cf. Vezzali & Stathi, 2021), it is important to identify effective strategies to face intergroup conflict.

As explained above, interventions in educational contexts generally operationalized vicarious contact by means of story reading. In the stories, ingroup

characters have positive interactions with outgroup characters. Given the specificity of stigma-based bullying as a form of discrimination, we decided to create ad-hoc vicarious contact stories, where the protagonist is first bullied and then defended by bystanders (details in the Procedure). To increase the likelihood of capturing the attention of young children and provide them with a meaningful and involving story, we framed vicarious contact in terms of fairy tales. According to Crain, D'Alessio, McIntyre, and Smoke (1983; see also Bettelheim, 1976), fairy tales allow children to cope with their fears, not only because they face them through the story, but because they realize that there are solutions to problems. They also found in two studies that fairy tales favored children's absorption compared with stories not framed as fairy tales or with cartoons. In the present study, in the experimental condition, children engaged in three intervention sessions over the course of three weeks. Each week, they were read a fairy tale in small groups by an experimenter, followed by activities to reinforce its message. To assess the effects of the intervention, they were administered a questionnaire approximately one week after the last intervention session. Children in the control condition were only administered the questionnaire.

To assess intergroup perspective-taking, intergroup empathy, and peer norms, we relied on measures used in previous studies with similar age groups. As dependent variables, we decided to focus on name-calling and exclusionary behavior as two common forms of bullying (Aboud & Joong, 2008; Abrams et al., 2007; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Bullying episodes generally occur in the presence of bystanders, who often do not intervene to stop it (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Hong & Espelage, 2012). Bullying is therefore a social event often supported by peers. We therefore believe that identifying how to foster bystanders' reactions may be an effective way to stop bullying. This

argument is in line with studies showing that bystanders can be effective when they decide to intervene (Frey, Pearson, & Cohen, 2014).

We also decided to include two additional dependent variables used in more general vicarious contact research with children. In particular, we included measures of intentions to have contact with outgroup members and to help them should they need it. First, helping and willingness to make contact are responses that might help supporting victims of group-based bullying. Second, the inclusion of these measures allows comparability with previous research, and can indicate the eventual occurrence of differential mediating paths for reactions specifically focused on bullying and for more general reactions to prejudice.

### *Hypotheses*

We predicted that vicarious contact (vs. control) would positively impact on all hypothesized mediators and dependent variables. We further hypothesized that intergroup perspective-taking, intergroup empathy, and peer norms would mediate the effects of vicarious contact on the three dependent variables.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 129 Italian children from first- to third-grade classes (first grade starting roughly at six years) from a primary school located in Northern Italy. Classes were randomly assigned to the experimental or to the control condition. We excluded from data analysis two children with foreign origins, six children with disability, and four children who had problems in understanding the questionnaire, as assessed by the researchers. The final sample included 117 children (58 females, range 6.00-8.92 years,  $M_{age} = 7.58$  years,  $SD = 0.92$ ). The experimental condition included 53

participants (29 females, range 6.08-8.92 years,  $M_{age} = 7.69$  years,  $SD = 0.97$ ); 64 participants were assigned to the control condition (29 females, range 6.00-8.92 years,  $M_{age} = 7.51$  years,  $SD = 0.88$ ).

An a priori power analysis suggested a minimum sample of 100 participants for allowing a power of .80 to detect a medium to small effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.4$ ) for applying  $t$ -tests with two groups; a similar sample size ( $N = 113$ ) has been obtained for a regression model allowing a power of .80 to detect a small to medium effect size ( $f^2 = .11$ ) for four predictors.

### **Procedure**

All researchers who conducted the study were university students trained by the first and last authors of this article. In the experimental condition, children took part in three sessions (the first two lasting approximately 1 hour, the third lasting 2 hours), once per week for three consecutive weeks. In each class, participants were divided into small groups of approximately four to five members. Each week, children were read a fairy tale by the researcher within their small group.

We created ad hoc stories, in form of fairy tales concerning stigma-based bullying, and specifically bullying against children with foreign origins. The fairy tales (provided in the supplementary online material) were designed to present a range of potential bullying situations and reaction to them. They concerned both *direct* bullying, characterized by episodes of verbal face-to-face name-calling, and *indirect* bullying, that might occur by means of indirect psychological aggressive acts, such as social exclusion or false rumors aimed at slandering a peer to encourage his/her rejection from other peers (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006). The number of bullies and bystanders

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varied among the stories, with the aim of capturing a wide range of potential bullying situations and therefore favoring generalization of effects among participants.

In all fairy tales, the main roles were represented by: (1) the protagonist, impersonated by a foreign person coming to live in a new kingdom or county; attention was placed in depicting this person as an immigrant and therefore as an outgroup member, in order to make salient the intergroup distinction opposing host members (the group to which participants belonged) to outgroup members (immigrant people); (2) the antagonist (sometimes represented by more characters), who bullies (directly or indirectly) the main character; (3) the hero, who defends the protagonist; (4) the bystanders, who depending on the story react by addressing the bullying directly, or by supporting the victim.

Each fairy tale was characterized by a precise sequence. The immigrant character (protagonist) strives to be accepted by the majority group, but is isolated because the antagonist keeps offending and excluding him/her from his/her group, blatantly because of his/her different origins (in order to raise group salience). The immigrant character is therefore exposed to repeated bullying acts. In this phase, bystanders are influenced by the antagonist and exclude the protagonist. In the second part of the story, the hero (who belongs to the group of hosting people) defends the protagonist, facing the antagonist in different ways (in order to provide children with different patterns of behavior to react to bullying). In the final part of the story, the hero and the protagonist become friends; the bystanders change their minds toward the protagonist and apologize, forgetting the initial concerns and becoming friends with the protagonist. The stories end with a reconciliatory message, in order to favor harmony

within the peer group: the antagonist realizes the injustices perpetrated, and is forgiven by the protagonist (thus avoiding new situations of social exclusion).

Story reading was followed by short group discussions within small groups, focused on the main events of the plot. The discussion was followed by short activities, aimed to stimulate the recognition of emotions experienced by characters, awareness of ethnicity and/or immigration status as a possible cause of discrimination, injustice of bullying behavior and importance of reconciliation (activities used are provided as supplementary online material).

Participants taking part in the intervention were administered a questionnaire approximately one week after the last intervention session. Researchers that administered the intervention were different from those who administered the questionnaire, in order to avoid possible demand characteristics. Participants in the control condition were only administered the questionnaire. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

The stories used in the intervention are provided as supplementary online material.

### **Measures**

For all items, the response scale ranged from 1 (*absolutely no*) to 5 (*absolutely yes*).

*Peer norms.* The introduction of the peer norms measure invited children to think about the situation of a foreign child who is excluded from a game or insulted only because of his/her foreign origin. Children were asked to answer two items: “Do you think that your friends would say that it is fair to exclude or offend a child only because she or he is foreign?”; “Would your friends say that such behavior toward the



foreign child is wrong?” After reverse-scoring the first item, scores were averaged to create a reliable composite index ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of peer norms against bullying.

*Intergroup empathy.* Children were asked to think about the same situation used for the peer norms measure, and to answer two items assessing empathy, adapted from Birtel et al. (2019). A sample item is: Do you feel like she or he [the foreign child] feels? Answers were averaged to create a reliable composite score of empathy ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ).

*Intergroup perspective-taking.* Two items were used, adapted from Vezzali et al. (2020). Children were asked whether, in response to the same situation stimulus used to assess peer norms and intergroup empathy, they would try to see things from the foreign child’s point of view, and they would put themselves in the foreign child’s shoes. We created a composite measure of intergroup perspective-taking by combining the two items ( $r = .29, p = .001$ ).

*Bystanders’ reactions.* We used scenarios and measures by Abbott and Cameron (2014), and by Vezzali et al. (2020). Children were presented with scenarios of name-calling behavior and of exclusionary behavior of a foreign child only because of his/her foreign origins, and were then invited to answer items investigating what they would do. For reactions to name-calling, six items were proposed. Specifically, children were asked whether they would: try to make the foreign child feel better, tell the foreign child to ignore the bully, get angry against the bully, tell the bully to stop telling bad names, report the bully to their teachers or parents. For reactions to exclusionary behavior the measure consisted of four items: participants were asked whether they would play with the foreign child, comfort the foreign child, tell the foreign child to ignore the bully, tell

their friends to play all together with the foreign child. Reliabilities of the two measures were poor (for reactions to name-calling,  $\alpha = .38$ ; for reactions to social exclusion,  $\alpha = .41$ ). Instead, a unique composite score of the 10 items assessing reactions to bullying was reliable ( $\alpha = .62$ ). In a principal component analysis, all items except one (Item 5 of reactions to name-calling) loaded on a single dimension explaining 26% of variance (factor loadings  $\geq .37$ ). Running the analysis with a 9-item composite score of reactions to bullying (i.e. excluding the item with low factor loading) yielded the same results. Therefore, we treated bystanders' reactions as a unique variable.

*Contact intentions.* We assessed contact intentions with three items. Participants were asked whether, in case they met a foreign child at the park, they would be happy to get acquainted, play, go and have an ice-cream together (adapted from Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Vezzali et al., 2020). Items were averaged in a composite score of willingness to have contact with the outgroup ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Helping intentions.* We adapted four items from Vezzali et al. (2020; see also Vezzali et al., 2015, Study 1), e.g. "If a foreign child at school has problems in doing his/her homework, would you help him/her?". We collapsed the four items in a reliable index of helping intentions ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

## Results

To the extent that neither age nor gender was associated neither with condition nor with any of our measured variables ( $ps > .28$ ), we will not discuss them further. First, in order to test the effectiveness of the intervention, we ran a series of *t*-tests assessing the effect of the experimental manipulation (see Table 1; correlations are presented in Table 2). In line with expectations, peer norms, intergroup empathy, and contact intentions were higher in the experimental than in the control condition. In

contrast to predictions, intergroup perspective-taking, bystanders' reactions, and helping intentions, did not significantly differ between the experimental and the control condition.

In order to test whether the experimental manipulation affected our dependent variables indirectly via hypothesized mediators, we conducted mediation analyses by using Model 4 in PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2016). Condition (+1 = experimental condition; -1 = control condition) served as the independent variable. Given that the intervention did not alter intergroup perspective-taking, we only considered peer norms and intergroup empathy as potential mediators. Dependent variables were bystanders' reactions, contact intentions, and helping intentions. Results are presented in Table 3 (see also Figure 1). As can be seen, intergroup empathy was positively associated with the three dependent variables; the effects of condition and peer norms were nonsignificant. Inspection of indirect effects revealed that, partially consistent with predictions, condition was indirectly associated via greater intergroup empathy with stronger bystanders' reactions, and with higher intentions to have contact with and help outgroup members (Table 4).<sup>1</sup>

### **Discussion**

Results from one field experimental intervention conducted with primary schoolchildren revealed that vicarious contact can promote intentions to counteract stigma-based bullying, in addition to foster greater willingness to have contact with and help outgroup members. Intergroup empathy emerged as the underlying process.

The present findings show for the first time that vicarious contact can be used to fight stigma-based bullying. In partial contrast with predictions, effects on intentions to react to bullying emerged only indirectly, via greater intergroup empathy. Possibly,

fostering intentions to react to bullying is especially demanding, since it implies not only that children have positive outgroup attitudes and negatively evaluate bullying against an outgroup, but also that they decide to intervene (or at least, intend to), with the potential costs associated with this decision. This statement is in line with research showing that discrimination often goes unchallenged (Aboud & Miller, 2007), also because of the risk of being socially excluded (Mulvey, Palmer, & Abrams, 2016). Wallrich, Palmer, and Rutland (2021) conducted a field experiment showing that a focus on self-efficacy may be important to favor active reactions by bystanders. Future field studies should extend these findings to children, investigating whether a focus on self-efficacy can help actively face group-based bullying.

These findings are in line with studies showing that empathy is an important antecedent of bystanders' reactions to bullying (Zych et al., 2019). They are also in line with initial evidence that intergroup empathy mediates the effects of direct (Abbott & Cameron, 2014) and extended contact (Antonio et al., 2017) on intentions to react to stigma-based bullying (but existing studies showed it for a different age group). It is the first time, however, that intergroup empathy emerges as mediator of vicarious contact on intentions to counteract stigma-based bullying.

The present results are also in line with the broader literature on vicarious contact, revealing that vicarious contact improves contact and helping intentions, and that intergroup empathy works as the underlying process (Di Bernardo et al., 2017). Note that the intervention did not have a direct effect on helping intentions. Helping intentions may require a more proactive behavior than contact intentions, being more resistant to change; in this vein, other studies conducted with children have found that

vicarious contact is associated only indirectly with helping intentions (Cocco et al., 2021).

Contrary to predictions, vicarious contact did not change intergroup perspective-taking. It is possible that the vicarious contact manipulation was not sufficiently strong to change it. It is also possible that the fairy tale and associated activities better highlighted the injustice of bullying (tackling peer norms) and the understanding of emotions of the victim, rather than his/her thoughts. Note that other studies using a similar sample found that vicarious contact did not change intergroup perspective-taking (Cocco et al., 2021).

A further relevant finding is that vicarious contact changed peer norms, fostering the idea that ingroup members would perceive stigma-based bullying as wrong. However, in contrast with growing research considering bullying in terms of group processes (Jones et al., 2017; Trifiletti et al., 2020), peer norms were not associated with any of the dependent variables. There may be different explanations for this finding. First, at a methodological level, the measure of peer norms might be conceptually disconnected from the dependent variables. Palmer et al. (2015) found an association between the specific norm to intervene in case of bullying and intentions to counteract bullying; in this study, we rested on a more general anti-bullying peer norm. Also, the measure of contact and helping intentions assessed general willingness to meet outgroup members and help them in various situations, all behaviors not assessed in terms of responses to bullying acts, and therefore disconnected from an anti-bullying peer norm.

But there might also be a conceptual reason explaining our findings, related to the young age of our sample. Cameron et al. (2011) examined a sample of British children aged 6 to 11 years. They found that vicarious contact was associated with

increased contact intentions via stronger pro-contact ingroup social norms only among older children. Therefore, the indirect effect of social norms did not emerge among younger children of approximately the same age of our sample. The authors argued that this finding may be explained by the fact that group identification, and as a consequence adherence to social norms, becomes central in children's self-concept with increasing age (see also Ruble, Alvarez, Bachman, Cameron, Fuligni, & Coll, 2004). Also, young children may be less aware that deviating from social norms may cause social exclusion, therefore they may be less committed to them (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). These arguments are in line with research showing that reliance on social norms and morality considerations increases with age (Rutland & Killen, 2015), and that ingroup bias starts declining between middle and late childhood (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), presumably at least in part under the influence of social norms. In other words, social norms may become central to the self later in childhood, thus explaining their nonsignificant associations with behavioral intentions in the present study. Future developmental research should explore this possibility, including samples from middle to late childhood.

Participants in the control condition were not administered any intervention or task. Future studies might include more demanding control conditions, in order to better elucidate the psychological processes implied in our intervention. As an example, a control condition where participants are presented with similar stories, but where bystanders are instead passive, may better highlight the eventual role of social peer norms. Specifically, while passive bystanders would highlight a pro-bullying norm (or at best an ambiguous bullying norm), active bystanders (like the ones presented in our stories) can contribute to form an anti-bullying norm. Such a contrast can be more

precise in clarifying whether the effectiveness of our intervention also depends on social norms.

It is worth noting that participants engaged in discussions on the stories and in reinforcing activities after story reading. We believe these discussions, which are typical of prejudice-reduction interventions, favored the effectiveness of the intervention. Future studies should however clarify the additional contribution of discussions and/or reinforcing activities, in order to isolate the factors that increase intervention effectiveness.

It should be noted that, departing from the vicarious contact literature using story reading in naturalistic interventions, we structured the stories as fairy tales, in order to capture children's attention and providing a more engaging experience (cf. Crain et al., 1983). While Cocco et al. (2021) compared stories and videos keeping the content constant (and finding no difference in the effectiveness of these two formats), future studies may take the manipulation we used further, comparing fairy tales and 'classic' stories by keeping their content constant. Including measures of character identification and absorption into the narrative may further provide indications not only on whether one form is more effective than the other, but also if they operate through distinct processes.

The stories ended with a positive message about reconciliation with the bully. One may object that this is an idealistic message, somehow legitimizing bullying, which can in some cases be forgiven. In addition, reconciliation may not make justice of the harm inflicted to the victims and what they have suffered. We do not think this is the case. The conciliatory message is consistent with a group approach which recognizes bullying as a group-based phenomenon (Jones, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2009). Once

the bully is excluded, similar situations may occur where the bully becomes the victim, and the former victim takes the role of the perpetrator (Zych et al., 2020). With reconciliation, social exclusion or discrimination is more unlikely to occur in a given social system. On the contrary, by showing remorse, the bully demonstrates recognition of victims' suffering and acceptance of an anti-bullying norm. Caution should however be used, making sure to avoid the message that bullying can be easily forgiven and can therefore be legitimized.

The present findings have important practical implications. Interventions aimed at preventing bullying can take advantage of vicarious contact techniques, with the possibility to use contact principles also in contexts characterized by a numerical imbalance between majority and minority group members. Fairy tales use a language tailored to young children's understanding, allowing to capture their attention and providing an engaging plot that is more likely to be effective. Such stories and post discussions should focus on the emotions experienced by the victim as a consequence of bullying. Attention should also be placed on reinforcing activities, which can favor a proper understanding of the message conveyed. Reinforcing activities are generally intended as something additional that strengthens the effects of an intervention, but are not an integral part of it. We argue instead that reinforcing activities should be theoretically driven and constitute an integral part of interventions. Stories are complex tools, which include several components and therefore can highlight different aspects, depending on the sensitivity of the receiver. They may therefore be used to provide a background against which tailor activities. Such activities can help clarifying the stories, by focusing on the specific message they should convey. Importantly, they should not merely reinforce, but actually actively tap specific dimensions. As an example, in the



stories we presented, reinforcing activities can be focused on noting and developing the importance of empathizing with others, in order to delineate a precise message for the participants.

Our intervention also has implications for schools more generally. Far from suggesting that stigma-based bullying can be tackled only with ad hoc stories, we nonetheless believe that schools can consider fairy tales as useful and non-costly tools. The advantage of stories and fairy tales is that they are commonly educational tools used by teachers, therefore they may be easily included in school curricula. By adapting them for use with stigma-based bullying, they can serve two scopes: the ‘classic’ educational aims, and the aim to fight discrimination by promoting social integration and reactions against group-based injustice. Schools should however consider a broader approach against stigma-based bullying, of which fairy tales are only a component. Note that institutional support is key for the improvement of intergroup relations (Allport, 1954), and only a consistent and enduring action by schools and teachers can provide children with the perception of active support against group-based bullying and more generally group discrimination (Mäkinen et al., 2021).

We acknowledge some limitations. First, the two scales for intentions to react to bullying showed low reliability scores, and reliability for the global score obtained by combining the two measures was sub-optimal. Results for this measure should therefore be interpreted with caution and replicated with reliable measures. Second, we only considered majority group members; to the extent that group-based bullying can also occur among minority group-members, it is important to investigate whether they are also responsive to similar interventions. Third, although we assessed behavioral intentions, we lack a measure of actual behavior; although intentions are the most

proximal predictor of behavior, finding effects on actual behavior would provide greater confidence in the results. Fourth, for practical reasons, allocation to condition was performed at the level of the class rather than at the individual level, leaving open the possibility of class effects. Fifth, we did not include pre-test measures, which would have been important to provide evidence for successful randomization. Finally, although participants' gender did not change the results of the intervention, we cannot exclude a role of gender. Categorization based on gender is often salient, and we did not consider eventual patterns of multiple categorization (where both a stigmatized identity and gender are salient) that can operate. Also note that we did not systematically vary the gender of characters playing the different roles (bully, victim, bystander): such a test is important to understand whether and why gender plays a role.

In conclusion, stigma-based bullying represents a dangerous form of discrimination that can seriously affect children's well-being. The present intervention shows that stigma-based bullying can be effectively contrasted since middle to late childhood, relying on a prejudice-reduction technique easy to implement like vicarious contact.

**Footnotes**

1. Results of mediation analyses do not change when statistically controlling for gender.

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