Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: The middle school years are often challenging for many children and bullying incidents peak in middle school. I’m Emily Yeap.

Last week on the Missouri State Journal, psychologist Dr. Leslie Echols, highlighted her current research focus on bullying and victimization, particularly among middle school students. She also talked about “Powering Up,” her joint research project with Dr. Sandra Graham from University of California, Los Angeles. It's made possible by a grant of about half a million dollars from the National Science Foundation. Echols, an associate professor of psychology at Missouri State University, joins me again today to address the key goals of “Powering Up.”

Leslie Echols: We have these three components of the program and so we actually have goals for each of those components. For the “Peer Power” component, we really hope to see a change in the norms about bullying in each school that we’re in. We do know that developmentally it is very common for bullying to increase in middle school and so we’re not actually optimistic that the rates of bullying are going to decrease a lot. We think they may decrease a little bit, but we know that because it’s such a normative process during the middle school years we may not be able to change that a lot. Even if we can’t change the rates of bullying, we do hope that we can change those norms about bullying. So, what I mean is whether students see bullying as acceptable we want to change that attitude that it is not acceptable. And that has real benefits for the students, even if the rates of bullying themselves don’t change that much. That second component of the program, which is “Why Power?” is where we hope to see the biggest differences. When the students who are participating in that aspect of the program, when they start, these are the students that tend to attribute blame to themselves for these negative social experiences. And we are really hoping to shift those attributions so that they no longer blame themselves but they see and recognize that bullying is occurring for reasons outside of themselves. So, we are really hoping to see that attributional shift and then also more positive mental health in general among that group. And then for the third aspect of the program, we are hoping to see more friendships develop in the schools just in general among the program participants, but also among the school population because remember our kiddos are spreading this information to the rest of the population. So, we are really hoping to see friendships increase which should improve everyone’s adjustment outcome.

Emily Yeap: Due to COVID-19, the original three-year grant has been extended.

Leslie Echols: We’re in year two technically now, and we’ll get three more years. So we’ll have five years total to be running this program and look at the outcomes among students and make any changes we need to to make the program as effective as possible.

Emily Yeap: Echols hopes to implement “Powering Up” in at least eight schools with about a total of 2,500 students participating. For parents who worry about their child getting bullied at school, Echols offers these encouraging words.

Leslie Echols: I just want to remind the parents that it is a normative process and the more we can help students understand that it’s not them, it’s about being in middle school. That’s not true a hundred percent of the time, but most of the time, it just happens to a lot of students and it happened to some students more than others but we want them to know that it gets better. Bullying decreases in high school, thankfully, and there is so much hope that things are going to get better and parents can tell their students that. It will get better and it’s not about you.

Emily Yeap: That was Dr. Leslie Echols, associate professor of psychology at MSU. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.