

The Effect of Group Counseling Using the Behavior Contract Technique on Verbal Bullying Among Eighth-Grade Students at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of group counseling using the behavior contract technique on verbal bullying among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan. A quantitative approach was employed using a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design. The participants were six eighth-grade students identified as having high levels of verbal bullying based on a screening questionnaire. Data were collected using a valid and reliable verbal bullying questionnaire and analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The mean verbal bullying score decreased from 161.83 at pretest to 106.17 at posttest, representing a mean reduction of 55.67 points (34.4%). The Wilcoxon test yielded $Z = -2.201$ and an asymptotic two-tailed significance value of .028, indicating a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores. All six participants showed lower verbal bullying scores after the intervention, with no positive ranks or ties. These findings indicate that group counseling using the behavior contract technique was associated with a significant reduction in verbal bullying among the participating students. The findings also suggest that behavior contracts may provide a structured mechanism for helping students identify inappropriate verbal behaviors, establish behavioral commitments, and reinforce more adaptive forms of peer interaction.

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Introduction

Bullying is a social problem that continues to occur frequently, particularly in school settings (Afriani & Afrinaldi, 2023). In Indonesia, bullying has become an issue requiring serious attention because of its negative consequences for students, educators, and the broader educational process.

According to a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the prevalence of bullying in Indonesia reached 41.1%, placing Indonesia fifth among 78 countries with the highest reported levels of bullying (Junindra et al., 2022). In practice, victims of bullying may experience a range of harmful behaviors, including having belongings stolen, being subjected to intimidation, becoming targets of ridicule, and receiving threats from perpetrators.

The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported that 87.6% of children had experienced bullying in school settings. Of the reported incidents, 42.1% were perpetrated by classmates, 29.9% by teachers, and 28.0% by students from other classes (Prima, 2025). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) has also reported substantial exposure to bullying among adolescents, while previous research cited in the manuscript indicates that Indonesian students have experienced ridicule, humiliation, exclusion, physical aggression, and pushing with varying frequency (Wiyani, 2014).

Data from the Gender and Child Information System (SIGA) of North Sumatra Province recorded 1,140 cases of violence against children in 2022, including 141 female victims and 999 male victims. Peers were the most frequently identified perpetrators, accounting for 267 cases. In 2023, Medan ranked second in North Sumatra in the number of reported bullying cases, with 173 cases, while Asahan Regency ranked first with 266 cases (Sistem Informasi Gender dan Anak Provinsi Sumatera Utara [SIGA], 2023).

These figures indicate that bullying constitutes a substantial concern that requires systematic intervention. Bullying may have serious consequences for victims, including

psychological distress, physical health problems, and trauma; in severe cases, its consequences may include depression and other serious mental-health outcomes (Kandia, 2024). Larasati et al. (2025), in a study conducted at SMPN 4 Padang Panjang, reported that bullying affected victims' behavior and school engagement. Victims were described as becoming quieter, withdrawing from peers, losing motivation to study, experiencing fear and anxiety, having difficulty concentrating, and becoming reluctant to attend school. The study also identified stress, excessive anxiety, low self-confidence, and depression as possible psychological consequences.

Preliminary observations conducted by the researchers on October 29, 2025, at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan identified verbal bullying directed at peers during recess, classroom activities, and Friday cleaning activities. The observed behaviors included insulting peers based on physical characteristics, using degrading nicknames, calling peers by their parents' names, using offensive language, shouting, and making sarcastic remarks intended to ridicule or attract attention. An interview with the school counselor, Ibu Harianja, produced findings consistent with the observations. According to the counselor, verbal bullying was present in almost every class and was sometimes perceived by students as normal or ordinary peer interaction.

One approach that can be used to address verbal bullying is group counseling delivered by school counselors. Adhiputra (2014) describes group counseling as a helping service conducted in a group context to prevent problems, develop personal potential, and support optimal individual development. Group counseling can also strengthen personal skills, prevent emerging problems, and facilitate the resolution of interpersonal conflicts. Lesmana (2005) similarly conceptualizes group counseling as a helping process intended to improve clients' skills and mental health so that they can respond more effectively to problems and conflicts. In this study, group counseling is positioned as a structured helping process for reducing verbal bullying.

The behavior contract is a behavioral technique intended to replace undesirable behaviors with more adaptive behaviors. Through a behavior contract, individuals are encouraged to learn new behaviors, reduce or eliminate inappropriate behaviors, and strengthen desirable behaviors through reinforcement following the performance of agreed-upon behaviors (Collins et al., 2021). Applied to verbal bullying, the technique can help students recognize that insulting, assigning degrading nicknames, threatening, mocking, swearing at, humiliating, and defaming peers can cause harm. Discussion and reflection within each counseling session are used to help students understand the consequences of these behaviors and commit to behavioral change.

Previous studies provide empirical support for this approach. Andiani and Habsy (2021) reported that group counseling using a behavior contract reduced verbal bullying among six eighth-grade students at SMP Sunan Ampel Jombang. Their mean score decreased from 56.33 at pretest to 48.83 at posttest, a mean reduction of 7.50 points. Khafidhiyah et al. (2023) likewise found that group counseling using a behavioral approach reduced bullying among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Demak; in their 10-student intervention group, the mean score decreased from 82.6 to 63.1, a reduction of 19.5 points.

The research gap identified in the present study concerns the geographical and contextual setting. Although previous studies conducted in areas such as Demak and Jombang have reported positive changes following counseling interventions, the authors did not identify a comparable study conducted in North Sumatra within the scope of the literature reviewed. The present study therefore examined the effect of group counseling using the behavior contract technique on verbal bullying among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan.

The study specifically addressed whether group counseling using the behavior contract technique was associated with a significant change in verbal bullying among eighth-grade students. The objective was to examine changes in verbal bullying scores before and after the intervention.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a pre-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design. The intervention consisted of group counseling using the behavior contract technique and was intended to reduce verbal bullying among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan during the 2026/2027 academic year.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan, Jalan Besar Tembung, Bandar Khalipah, Percut Sei Tuan District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Data collection took place during the second semester of the 2026 academic year, from July to August 2026.

The participants were eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Percut Sei Tuan. Purposive sampling was used. Initially, 30 eighth-grade students who showed indications of verbal bullying were screened. Based on the verbal bullying pretest, six students from class VIII-10 were classified in the high category. These six students were subsequently selected as the intervention participants and received group counseling using the behavior contract technique.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a verbal bullying questionnaire developed on a Likert scale. The source manuscript reports that the instrument had been tested for validity and reliability. The questionnaire consisted of 43 items, with a response range of 1–4. The maximum possible score was therefore 172 and the minimum was 43.

Data Analysis

The verbal bullying score was categorized into three levels. The score range was 129 points ($172 - 43$), and the interval width was 43 points ($129/3$). Scores of 129–172 were classified as high, 86–128 as moderate, and 43–85 as low.

Data analysis included a normality test and hypothesis testing. The manuscript reports the use of the Shapiro–Wilk test through IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 because the sample size was fewer than 50. A significance value greater than .05 was interpreted as indicating normality. The hypothesis was tested using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare paired pretest and posttest scores. A two-tailed significance value below .05 was interpreted as evidence of a statistically significant difference.

Result and Discussion

Results

Verbal Bullying Score Categories

The verbal bullying scale contained 43 items scored from 1 to 4. The maximum possible score was 172 (43×4), the minimum was 43 (43×1), and the score range was 129. Dividing the range into three categories produced an interval width of 43 points.

Table 1. Criteria for Verbal Bullying Levels

Interval	Category
129–172	High
86–128	Moderate
43–85	Low

Pretest Results

The pretest results showed scores of 164 (AN), 162 (NN), 161 (DA), 158 (DY), 160 (MH), and 166 (LN). The total pretest score was 971, with a maximum of 166, a minimum of 158, and a mean of 161.83. Thus, all six participants entered the intervention with high verbal bullying scores.

Table 2. Pretest Verbal Bullying Scores

No.	Participant	Score	Category
1	AN	164	High
2	NN	162	High
3	DA	161	High
4	DY	158	High
5	MH	160	High
6	LN	166	High
	Total	971	
	Maximum	166	
	Minimum	158	
	Mean	161.83	

Posttest Results

Following completion of the group counseling intervention, posttest scores were 104 (AN), 83 (NN), 107 (DA), 115 (DY), 120 (MH), and 108 (LN). The total posttest score was 637, with a maximum of 120, a minimum of 83, and a mean of 106.17. These results indicate a reduction in verbal bullying scores for every participant.

Table 3. Posttest Verbal Bullying Scores

No.	Participant	Score	Category
1	AN	104	Moderate
2	NN	83	Low
3	DA	107	Moderate
4	DY	115	Moderate
5	MH	120	Moderate
6	LN	108	Moderate
	Total	637	
	Maximum	120	
	Minimum	83	
	Mean	106.17	

Pretest–Posttest Changes

The individual reductions were 60 points (36.6%) for AN, 79 points (48.8%) for NN, 54 points (33.5%) for DA, 43 points (27.2%) for DY, 40 points (25.0%) for MH, and 58 points (34.9%) for LN. Across participants, the total reduction was 334 points, while the mean reduction was 55.67 points, equivalent to 34.4% of the mean pretest score.

Table 4. Pretest and Posttest Verbal Bullying Scores

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	164	104	60	36.6%
NN	162	83	79	48.8%
DA	161	107	54	33.5%
DY	158	115	43	27.2%
MH	160	120	40	25.0%
LN	166	108	58	34.9%
Total	971	637	334	34.4%
Maximum	166	120	46	27.7%
Minimum	158	83	75	47.5%
Mean	161.83	106.17	55.67	34.4%

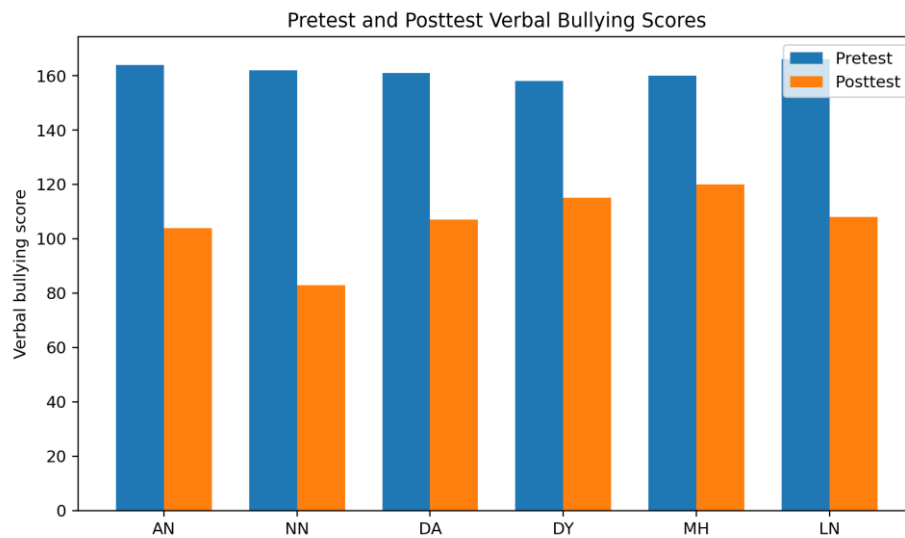


Figure 1. Pretest and posttest verbal bullying scores by participant.

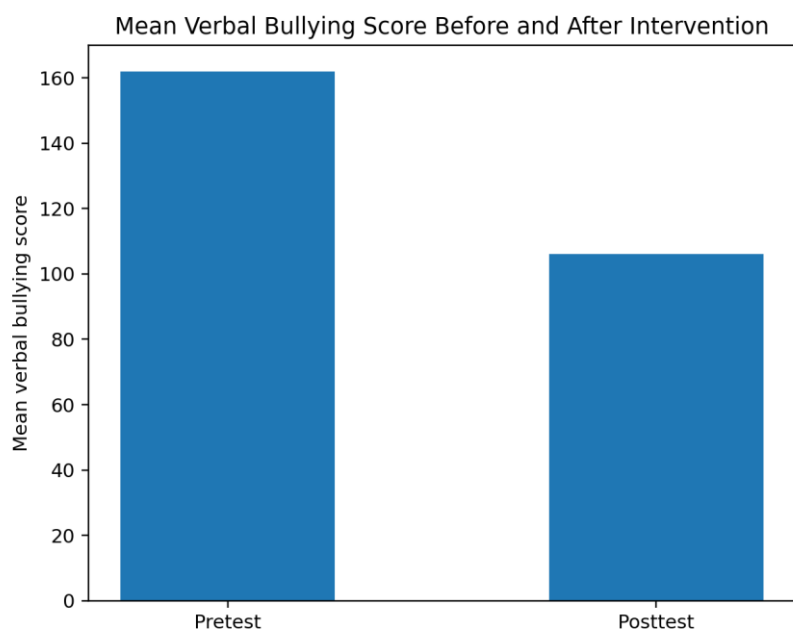


Figure 2. Mean verbal bullying score before and after the intervention.

Changes by Behavioral Indicator

Table 5. Pretest and Posttest Results for Insulting

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	24	16	8	33.3%
NN	22	11	11	50.0%
DA	24	15	9	37.5%
DY	23	15	8	34.8%
MH	23	16	7	30.4%
LN	23	17	6	26.1%
Total	139	90	49	35.3%
Mean	23.17	15	8.17	35.3%
Maximum	24	17	7	29.2%
Minimum	22	11	11	50.0%

Table 6. Pretest and Posttest Results for Assigning degrading nicknames

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	32	19	13	40.6%
NN	26	17	9	34.6%
DA	32	18	14	43.8%
DY	31	21	10	32.3%
MH	30	21	9	30.0%
LN	31	20	11	35.5%

Total	182	116	66	36.3%
Mean	30.33	19.33	11	36.3%
Maximum	32	21	14	43.8%
Minimum	26	17	9	34.6%

Table 7. Pretest and Posttest Results for Threatening

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	28	17	11	39.3%
NN	27	14	13	48.1%
DA	26	17	9	34.6%
DY	25	19	6	24.0%
MH	26	20	6	23.1%
LN	28	18	10	35.7%
Total	160	105	55	34.4%
Mean	26.67	17.5	9.17	34.4%
Maximum	28	20	13	46.4%
Minimum	25	14	6	24.0%

Table 8. Pretest and Posttest Results for Mocking

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	24	16	8	33.3%
NN	26	12	14	53.8%
DA	26	15	11	42.3%
DY	26	22	4	15.4%
MH	26	19	7	26.9%
LN	27	16	11	40.7%
Total	155	100	55	35.5%
Mean	25.83	16.67	9.17	35.5%
Maximum	27	22	14	51.9%
Minimum	24	12	4	16.7%

Table 9. Pretest and Posttest Results for Swearing

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	17	12	5	29.4%
NN	19	9	10	52.6%
DA	20	12	8	40.0%
DY	17	11	6	35.3%
MH	29	15	14	48.3%
LN	18	11	7	38.9%
Total	120	70	50	41.7%
Mean	20	11.67	8.33	41.7%
Maximum	29	15	14	48.3%
Minimum	17	9	5	29.4%

Table 10. Pretest and Posttest Results for Humiliating

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	28	16	12	42.9%
NN	28	15	13	46.4%
DA	24	18	6	25.0%
DY	27	19	8	29.6%
MH	26	24	2	7.7%
LN	28	16	12	42.9%
Total	161	108	53	32.9%
Mean	26.83	18	8.83	32.9%
Maximum	28	24	13	46.4%
Minimum	24	15	2	8.3%

Table 11. Pretest and Posttest Results for Defaming

Participant	Pretest	Posttest	Change	Reduction
AN	11	8	3	27.3%
NN	14	5	9	64.3%
DA	9	6	3	33.3%
DY	11	9	2	18.2%
MH	11	6	5	45.5%
LN	11	10	1	9.1%
Total	67	44	23	34.3%
Mean	11.17	7.33	3.83	34.3%
Maximum	14	10	9	64.3%
Minimum	9	5	1	11.1%

Normality Test

The normality analysis reported in Table 12 showed Kolmogorov–Smirnov significance values of .200 for both pretest and posttest data. The Shapiro–Wilk values were .987 for the pretest and .331 for the posttest. All reported significance values exceeded .05, indicating that the pretest and posttest scores did not significantly depart from normality.

Table 12. Tests of Normality

Measure	Kolmogorov–Smirnov Statistic	df	Sig.	Shapiro–Wilk Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	.143	6	.200	.989	6	.987
Posttest	.266	6	.200	.892	6	.331

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov significance value is reported with the Lilliefors significance correction in the source output.

Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test

The Wilcoxon signed-rank analysis showed six negative ranks, no positive ranks, and no ties. The mean rank was 3.50 and the sum of ranks was 21.00. The test statistic was $Z = -2.201$, with an asymptotic two-tailed significance value of .028. Because $.028 < .05$, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. Thus, a statistically significant difference was observed between pretest and posttest verbal bullying scores.

Table 13. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Ranks

Comparison	Rank	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Posttest – Pretest	Negative ranks	6	3.50	21.00
Posttest – Pretest	Positive ranks	0	.00	.00
Posttest – Pretest	Ties	0		
Posttest – Pretest	Total	6		

Table 14. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Statistics

Statistic	Posttest – Pretest
Z	–2.201
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.028

Discussion

The central finding of this study was a statistically significant reduction in verbal bullying scores following four sessions of group counseling using the behavior contract technique. The mean score decreased from 161.83 at pretest to 106.17 at posttest, a mean reduction of 55.67 points or 34.4%. Importantly, all six participants showed a reduction, and the Wilcoxon analysis produced six negative ranks, no positive ranks, and no ties.

At the individual level, the magnitude of change varied. NN showed the largest proportional reduction (48.8%), followed by AN (36.6%), LN (34.9%), DA (33.5%), DY (27.2%), and MH (25.0%). Although the pattern was not uniform, the direction of change was consistent across participants. This consistency is also reflected in the absence of positive ranks in the Wilcoxon analysis.

The findings are theoretically consistent with the behavioral foundation of behavior contracting. A behavior contract specifies the behavior expected from the client, establishes an explicit commitment, and provides a structure for monitoring and reinforcing behavioral change. Collins et al. (2021) describe behavior contracts as a mechanism for increasing desirable behavior and reducing inappropriate behavior across child and adolescent settings. In the present study, the technique was directed toward helping students identify forms of verbal bullying, understand their consequences, and commit to reducing them.

Group counseling provides an additional interpersonal context in which behavioral commitments can be discussed, reflected upon, and reinforced. Adhiputra (2014) describes group counseling as a helping process that can support personal development, prevent problems, and address interpersonal conflict. Lesmana (2005) similarly emphasizes the role of counseling in improving clients' skills and mental health. In the present intervention, the group format allowed students to discuss verbal bullying behaviors and their consequences while developing commitments for more appropriate peer interaction.

The indicator-level findings provide further detail. Insulting decreased from 139 at pretest to 90 at posttest, a reduction of 49 points (35.3%). Assigning degrading nicknames decreased from 182 to 116, a reduction of 66 points (36.3%). Threatening decreased from 160 to 105, a reduction of 55 points (34.4%). Mocking decreased from 155 to 100, a reduction of 55 points (35.5%). Swearing showed a reduction from 120 to 70, equivalent to 50 points (41.7%). Humiliating decreased from 161 to 108, a reduction of 53 points (32.9%). Defaming decreased from 67 to 44, a reduction of 23 points (34.3%). These results suggest that the intervention was accompanied by reductions across each measured form of verbal bullying.

The reduction in swearing was comparatively large in percentage terms, whereas humiliating showed a more modest proportional reduction. This pattern may indicate that different forms of verbal bullying respond differently to a short behavioral intervention. However, because the sample consisted of only six students and there was no comparison group, differences between indicators should be interpreted descriptively rather than as evidence that the intervention was differentially effective across behaviors.

The findings are consistent with earlier studies. Andiani and Habsy (2021) reported a decrease in verbal bullying among six eighth-grade students who received group counseling using a behavior contract. Khafidhiyah et al. (2023) likewise reported a significant pretest–posttest difference following group counseling with a behavioral approach among eighth-grade students in Demak. The present findings extend this line of evidence to a school context in North Sumatra.

From a counseling perspective, the intervention appears to provide students with an explicit framework for translating awareness into behavioral commitments. Rather than addressing bullying only through general moral instruction, the behavior contract

makes the desired change observable and concrete. Students can identify the verbal behaviors they need to reduce, specify alternative behaviors, and monitor whether the agreement is being followed. This structure is particularly relevant when students have normalized verbal teasing or derogatory language as ordinary peer interaction.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the methodological limitations of the study. The sample was very small ($n = 6$), was selected purposively from students with high pretest scores, and was drawn from a single school. The one-group pretest–posttest design also does not control for maturation, testing effects, regression to the mean, or other factors that could contribute to change. Therefore, the observed pretest–posttest difference should not be interpreted as definitive evidence of causal efficacy beyond the study context. Future research should include larger samples, comparison or control groups, longer follow-up periods, and, where feasible, multiple schools.

Another methodological point concerns the statistical analysis. The reported normality results indicate that the pretest and posttest distributions did not significantly deviate from normality, while the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was nevertheless used. The Wilcoxon test remains a defensible nonparametric procedure for paired observations, particularly with a very small sample, but the rationale for selecting it should be stated consistently in the final journal manuscript.

Overall, the evidence in this study supports the interpretation that group counseling combined with a behavior contract was accompanied by a significant reduction in verbal bullying among the six participating eighth-grade students. The intervention may therefore be considered a promising counseling strategy for school-based efforts to address verbal bullying, while stronger experimental designs are needed to establish generalizability and causal effectiveness.

Conclusion

The study found that all six participating eighth-grade students initially exhibited high levels of verbal bullying, with a mean pretest score of 161.83. After four sessions of group counseling using the behavior contract technique, the mean posttest score decreased to 106.17.

The mean reduction was 55.67 points, corresponding to 34.4%, and all participants showed lower posttest scores. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test produced $Z = -2.201$ and an asymptotic two-tailed significance value of .028, indicating a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores.

Reductions were also observed across all seven assessed indicators: insulting, assigning degrading nicknames, threatening, mocking, swearing, humiliating, and defaming. Taken together, these findings indicate that group counseling using a behavior contract was associated with a reduction in verbal bullying within the study group.

For practice, school counselors may consider behavior contracting as one structured component of group counseling for students exhibiting verbal bullying. Implementation should be accompanied by ongoing monitoring, reinforcement of positive communication, and collaboration among counselors, teachers, school leaders, parents, and students. Given the small sample and one-group design, further research with larger and more diverse samples, comparison groups, and longer follow-up is recommended.

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