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# Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Information for Educators

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*"Yeah, I see kids get pushed around, picked on, called rotten names at my school. Nobody stops it. It makes you feel bad inside. You can feel it in your stomach. Most of the time, I think I should do something, but it is like you are not supposed to. Anyway, I don't know what I could do. I try to stay away from those kids—the ones who do it."*

*—Ricky, middle school student*

Ricky's comments illustrate the dilemma faced by so many of our students who wish to stop school bullying but do not have the skills, power, or social permission to intervene. They often understand the emotional impact that bullying can have on their fellow students but realize it is a risky to confront bullies single-handedly.

Due to widespread reporting on the issue, society is beginning to understand the profound social, academic, and emotional impact that bullying has on youth. This has been underscored by findings of the U.S. Secret Service that as many as 70% of school shooters had been bullied while at school (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). In addition, as reported in the media, the consequences of bullying can be so severe that victims have taken their own lives as a result of the humiliation they experienced. Partly in response to these reports, schools have begun to take a more proactive approach by intervening with bullies and creating safer school climates. Many states have passed legislation mandating that bullying prevention programs and policies be instituted in all school districts. Today, school-wide bullying prevention strategies and programs are widely available. Most effective strategies and programs are universal in nature, that is, they focus on the entire school population and give the message that "Bullying is not tolerated in our school."

## **OVERVIEW OF BULLYING**

Surprisingly many children in schools are involved in bullying. In a large-scale national survey (Nasel et al., 2001), 30% of children reported being involved in bullying: 13% as bullies, 11% as victims, and 6% as both. Nearly 10% said they were involved in bullying once a week or more; 70% experienced bullying at some point in their schooling. As many as 7% of eighth graders reported staying home at least once a month due to fear of being bullied, and 14% of students said that exposure to bullying has had a negative impact on their lives.

### **Defining Bullying**

Bullying occurs when a person is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more persons. In the most accepted definition, bullying has four elements: (a) there is an imbalance of power (physical, intellectual, or emotional), (b) the action is repeated over time, (c) the action is intentional—that is, the bully is trying to hurt or intimidate the targeted victim, and (d) there is an unequal display of emotion—that is, the bully experiences a positive emotion while the victim experiences emotional distress (Olweus, 1993).

### **Why Do Students Bully?**

Students engage in bullying for a number of reasons. These include (a) gaining power over others, (b) experiencing excitement, (c) getting attention and popularity, (d) acting out problems coming from the home, (e) obtaining material possessions, (f) joining with the "in" crowd, or (g) copying someone who is

perceived as cool. Engaging in bullying demonstrates contempt for others. Because bullying is emotionally rewarding and most often occurs away from the eyes and ears of adults, it is hard to stop.

### **Teachers' and Students' Views of Bullying**

Because teachers are unable to be everywhere in school, and because bullying often occurs underneath their radar, teachers may grossly underestimate the amount of bullying that goes on in their schools. This is especially true for cyberbullying (using e-mail and websites) and relational bullying (behaviors meant to damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group). Further, there is evidence that teachers are reluctant to intervene in bullying, and students report that teachers are ineffective in both preventing and intervening with bullying (e.g., Olweus, 1993; Holt & Keys, 2004). Given the long-term consequences of bullying for both bully and target, it is critical that teachers recognize and effectively address bullying behavior in their classrooms.

### **Characteristics of Bullies and Long-Term Consequences**

Bullies come in all sizes, shapes, and abilities. They do not need to be larger to dominate their victims. However, bullies are typically stronger and more physically and verbally aggressive than their victims. They have a strong need to dominate others and often have a positive and unrealistic self-concept. Bullies enjoy controlling others and feel justified in their actions. They frequently lack guilt and remorse and get a thrill out of their behavior. The long-term outcomes for some bullies are poor. Children identified as bullies at age 8 were six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age 24 and five times more likely to end up with a criminal record by age 30 (Olweus, 1993); further, they often experience significant mental health problems such as depression (Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagler, & Mickelson, 2001).

### **Characteristics of Victims and Long-Term Consequences**

Often, victims of bullying have been characterized as anxious and insecure. They often are not connected to a strong social network and have less effective social skills. They tend to be more submissive, quiet, and cautious and may lack the skills necessary to defend themselves effectively. Other students may avoid them so they do not suffer the same fate. This makes the social world of the victim even smaller.

Chronic victims suffer severe and profound consequences. They are likely to avoid school and participate less in class. Due to the humiliation and fear that victims experience, they often have difficulty concen-

trating, which lowers their scholastic achievement. Emotionally, they suffer from low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. They may experience somatic illnesses such as headaches, nausea, sleep disturbances, and lack of appetite. They are more likely than their peers to feel lonely and rejected.

Being bullied during the middle school years has long-term consequences and predicts depression and lower self-esteem even 10 years after the bullying has ended. Also, victims are more likely to drop out of school, which affects their career opportunities and long-term earning ability. In the most extreme cases, victims may take their own lives rather than endure the constant pain associated with bullying.

### **PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION**

Unless schools develop comprehensive policies and procedures to create safe and supportive learning environments and ensure that all students are accepted and included, bullying will continue to occur and victims will suffer. Strategies to prevent and intervene with bullying have been studied and developed by the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and other leading scholars and educators.

#### **Key Principles of Bully Prevention**

The most substantive body of research to date on bullying prevention comes from the work of Dan Olweus (1993), who has emphasized changing the school climate to reduce the impact of bullying. His program has shown positive results in several countries. It follows these four steps:

1. Create both a school and home environment characterized by warmth, positive regard, and involvement with adults.
2. Establish firm limits against unacceptable behavior.
3. Apply nonphysical, nonhostile negative sanctions if a student breaks a rule.
4. Expect that all adults in the school have a responsibility for maintaining a safe and supportive school climate.

#### **Strategies for Prevention and Intervention**

The following strategies are based on best practices recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through their website, Stop Bullying Now; the seminal principles of Dan Olweus (1993) and his Bullying Prevention Program; and critical components of such antibullying programs as Bully Proofing Your School, Bully Busters, Steps to Respect, and PATHS (Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies); see Recommended Resources.

- Increase awareness and knowledge of bullying and dispel myths about bullying (e.g., boys will be boys; ignore bullies and the bullying will stop) among school personnel, parents, and community stakeholders.
- Survey all students using an anonymous questionnaire to determine the bullying problem in each school. Include questions like these: What types of bullying happen at school? Where does the bullying take place? How safe do students feel from bullying and harassment? How many students are involved?
- Develop a bullying coordinating committee to develop school antibullying policies and oversee implementation of antibullying programs, consisting of a school administrator, a school psychologist or counselor, teachers, parents, and students.
- Develop an effective antibullying school policy and establish clear and enforceable rules and sanctions. In doing so, make sure that school policies are consistent with board of education rules and state statutes. School rules should be posted and discussed with all students so they have a clear understanding of expectations.
- Consider having students sign a pledge that can include the following statements: (a) We will not bully other students; (b) We will help others who are being bullied by speaking out and by getting adult help; (c) We will use extra effort to include all students in activities at our school.
- Provide comprehensive training to all teachers and school staff about bullying prevention and intervention.
- Use survey results to make necessary changes to the school environment to create a safer and more supportive school climate.
- Develop a number of different ways that students can report bullying to adults. Investigate every report, provide follow-up, and take administrative actions as necessary.
- Increase adult supervision in areas identified in the survey as problematic. Bullying in schools often occurs in hallways, the cafeteria, on the playground, in locker rooms, and in restrooms.
- Intervene consistently when bullying occurs—never ignore it. Empower teachers with effective strategies to confront bullying on the spot.
- Hold separate follow-up meetings with bullies and victims. Provide support and protection to the victimized student. Conflict resolution and peer mediation strategies are not appropriate here because the victim is being abused by the bully and there is an unequal balance of power. Help the vulnerable child learn to assert himself more effectively. Teach the bully how to get her needs met in other ways. If possible, involve parents in the process.
- Have class meetings where students can discuss peer relations as well as any problems with bullying.
- Help foster nurturing relationships and friendship patterns within the school and classroom. This is especially important as the number and quality of friends protects children from being victimized. Those who have a number of friends, especially friends who are strong or popular, are less likely to become targets (Pelligrini & Long, 2004).
- Consider adopting a structured bullying prevention program such as Bully Proof Your School, Bully Busters, or Steps to Respect that teaches students, especially witnesses and victims, how to intervene when bullying occurs. Effective programs focus on knowledge, attitude change, and skill development taught through modeling, role-playing, and practice.
- Continue these efforts over time. Patience is required, as it may take up to 3 years to make a difference.

### **CONCLUSION: ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

The two most important considerations in preventing bullying are building relationships and establishing clear policies regarding acceptable behavior. Embolden the witnesses, who are neither bullies nor victims, to make sure that bullying is not permitted on campus. Once a sense of community and caring is established, students such as Ricky, whose comments began this handout, will feel empowered and have the support and skills needed to keep it that way.

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## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Print

Davidson, L. M., & Demaray, M. K. (2007). Social support as a moderator between victimization and internalizing-externalizing distress from bullying. *School Psychology Review*, 36, 383-405. Available: <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/SPR/sprmain.aspx>

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Feinberg, T. (2003). Bullying prevention and intervention. *Principal Leadership* [High School Edition], 4 (1), 10-14. Available: [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/nassp\\_bullying.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/nassp_bullying.aspx)

Felix, E., & Furlong, M. (2008). Best practices in bullying prevention. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1279-1289). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Merrell, K. W., Gueldner, B. A., Ross, S. W., & Isava, D. M. (2008). How effective are school bullying intervention programs? A meta-analysis of intervention research. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 1, 26-42.

### Online

American Medical Association. (2002). *Youth bullying: Proceedings, Educational Forum on Adolescent Health*. Available: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/39/youthbullying.pdf>

Cumberland County (NJ) AVA Center, Websites on bullying, vandalism & school violence: [http://www.cumbavac.org/Bullying\\_Violence\\_Vandalism.htm](http://www.cumbavac.org/Bullying_Violence_Vandalism.htm)

Fox, J. A., Elliott, D. S., Kerlikowske, R. G., Newman, S. A., & Christeson, W. (2003). *Bullying prevention is crime prevention*. Available: <http://clearinghouse.adhl.org/resources/BullyingPrevention.pdf>

Stop Bullying Now: <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov>

### Bullying Prevention Programs

Bully Busters: <http://www.stopbullyingnow.net>

Elementary and middle school programs.  
Bully Proofing Your School: <http://store.cambiumlearning.com>

Pre-K-12 programs available  
Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: <http://www.olweus.org>

Grades 3-10.  
Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) (Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development): <http://www.prevention.psu.edu/projects/PATHS.html>

Elementary grades.  
Steps to Respect (Committee for Children): <http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/str/overview/>

Grades 3-6.

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