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Bullying and Violence in Schools

What Teachers Should Know and Do

P

erhaps the greatest potential for stemming the tide of the global plague known as bullying lies in the actions of teachers heeding Dr. King's words quoted to the right. In order to respond, however, teachers urgently need help in recognizing bullying behaviors, understanding its causes, and taking deliberate steps to confront bullying and violence in our classrooms.

Identifying Bullying

The first step to mitigating classroom violence is to recognize specific characteristics of bullies. (The term "bullies" is used in this article to denote children who exhibit "bullying" behaviors. The authors believe such behaviors can be minimized or eliminated.) Identifying bullying behaviors, however, is a complex task, since research has not yet provided a consistent profile for identifying bullies. Some researchers (e.g., Baumeister, 2001; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) suggest that bullies can be identified by their exaggerated air of self-confidence and feelings of power. Bullies often report feeling powerful and justified in their actions (Bullock, 2002). Others (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Field, 1996) suggest that bullies can be recognized by their emotional immaturity. Researchers have found that bullying results when emotionally immature individuals are consumed with feelings of depression, inferiority, inadequacy, insecurity, loneliness, fear, jealousy, and rejection. Finally, Rodkin and Hodges (2003) suggest that bullies might be popular students who perversely use their social skills to promote violence. Such children often act as leaders of groups that bully.

Despite the lack of a consistent bullying profile, however, operational definitions are beginning to emerge. Such definitions generally describe bullying as a specific type of aggressive behavior that causes distress or harm, demonstrates an imbalance of power, and is repeated over time. Such aggression brings intense satisfaction to the bully, which perpetuates the bullying cycle still further (Field, 1996; Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003).

Yet another challenge to teachers who want to understand potential bullying behaviors in classrooms is the fluid nature of the bully-victim relationship. Espelage and Swearer (2003) and Long and Pellegrini (2003), for example, describe bullying as a *continuum* of complex behaviors, with

"He who passively
accepts evil is as much
involved in it as he
who helps to
perpetrate it."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

shifting fluidity, whereby bullies and victims exchange roles. For example, a child bullying others on the playground may himself be bullied by his victim, who excels more academically.

Bullying behaviors in classrooms must be identified. In addition, violence can be minimized only if teachers understand the complex set of variables that promote dispositions toward violence. Perhaps foremost among these influences are the media and exposure to violence in daily life.

Influence of Media and Everyday Exposure to Violence

We know from research that children are highly susceptible to media violence that promotes, condones, and/or devises new avenues for the bully to employ (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Violent media provides a social structure and/or model for the bully to follow (Bushman & Anderson, 2002). It allows the bully to justify his or her actions by offering scenarios that affirm bullying behavior as a legitimate mode of problem solving and as a societal norm. Children who might not otherwise consider using violence to bully others may do so when they are exposed to media that depicts bullying behaviors being rewarded. Such rewards are readily evident in such recent media as Rockstar's 2006 release of the video game "Bully," in which bullying is both glorified and encouraged. As such games become more popular, the numbers of potential bullies increase. In this way, bullying and violence are inextricably linked, as bullies search out and consume media that depicts violence towards others. The industry responds with escalated production of this type of media.

In addition to interacting with violent media, many children observe or experience other children, youth, or adults committing acts of violence and bullying with impunity (Gruenert, 2006). Observing such behaviors, especially if they do not see consequences, furthers the likelihood that other children will imitate what they have observed or experienced (Bandura, 1986).

Whatever influences might account for bullying behaviors, emerging research supports a powerful relationship between bullying and future acts of violence (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Baumeister, 2001). Those who bully are four times more likely than non-bullies to be convicted of a serious crime by age 24 (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2007; Olweus, 1993). Clearly, bullying must be addressed if we want less violent societies.

In response to the rapid increase in school shootings in the United States that are linked directly to bullying, most states now require bullying and violence prevention programs in their schools (Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003). The following sec-

tion describes programmatic elements of emerging anti-bullying models.

Bully Prevention Programs in Schools: Models From Abroad

The United States is a relative newcomer to implementing formal anti-bullying programs in its schools. Other countries, such as Australia, Canada, England, Italy, Japan, and Norway, launched national bully prevention programs long before the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado sparked serious concern over bullying in the United States. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in Norway, for example, is supported by more than 20 years of research and has been endorsed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services as a model that can be easily replicated. Due to the success of such international bullying prevention programs, many U.S. programs take them as models (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The Arizona Bullying Prevention Project, Colorado's Anti-Bullying Project, and The Main Project Against Bullying are all adaptations of international models.

While not identical, most of these programs share a number of program elements. First, most programs suggest that anti-bullying programs should begin in the earliest possible years. Orpinis, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003), for example, suggest that effective anti-bullying programs begin with preschool children. Such programs canvass communities to identify preschool-age children who exhibit bullying behaviors. Through guided interviews, parents are led to identify their children's potential bullying behaviors. Then, appropriate intervention activities to reduce bullying behaviors are provided.

In addition to providing early identification and intervention for children, successful programs also require adults associated with the school (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, and support staff) to receive specialized training in preventing violence and bullying in schools. This training is presented in an ongoing program that includes annual retraining. The trainees also are selected for an Anti-Bullying Task Force, which makes a biannual assessment of progress toward eliminating bullying in the schools. Moreover, such programs stress the importance of modeling non-violence by all in the school—especially adult-adult and adult-child violence. This task force also serves the community as an anti-bullying resource. In concert with early intervention, adult training, and the creation of a task force, many additional opportunities for effecting change within the school are available. These include helping adults and children to better understand bullies, to change bullying behaviors, and to identify and support potential targets of bullying.

Understanding Bullying Behavior

Most anti-bullying programs identify three major forms of bullying—physical, emotional, and verbal. *Physical bullying* includes physical contact that causes discomfort to another individual. An example might be a student who removes the metal edge of a ruler and uses it to jab others. *Emotional bullying* is aggression without words, as in exclusion and ignoring behaviors. An example of *verbal bullying*, also referred to as psychological bullying or relational aggression (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), may be seen when a girl reports that another girl is not talking to her *and* is encouraging everyone else to do the same.

A bully may use any of these three forms, in combination or separately. The combination of emotional and verbal bullying can be loosely grouped into the following common categories (Field, 2004):

- **Practiced Liar Bully:** A child exhibiting this genre of bullying can produce a convincing account at any moment that hides his violent acts. Such bullies excel at deception, and their ability to deceive should never be underestimated.
- **Jekyll and Hyde Bully:** This bully is ruthless and vindictive in private, but is innocent and helpful in front of witnesses. A common attribute, and a warning sign, is displaying excessive charm in front of those in authority.
- **Shallow, Superficial Bully:** The Shallow, Superficial Bully has exceptional verbal ability, but no substance to support his/her often illogical arguments, which are designed to hurt others. This bully generally talks a “big game,” but does not follow up on commitments and cannot be trusted or relied upon. The Shallow, Superficial Bully tends to create conflict to undermine and destroy anyone he/she perceives to be an adversary or a potential threat capable of unmasking this bully.
- **Highly Critical Bully:** This bullying type often uses covert tactics to humiliate, embarrass, degrade, or put down others. Such bullies rely on mimicry, taunting, teasing, embarrassing questioning, and refusals to value others.
- **Lobbying Bully:** Lobbying bullies use their persuasive powers to repeatedly convince others to accept their views and perceptions. These bullies employ rumor and innuendo with great skill to destroy others’ reputations. They exhibit arrogance, along with a superior sense of entitlement and audacity, while believing they are invulnerable and untouchable.
- **Evasive Bully:** These bullies seldom give a straight answer and flit from topic to topic to avoid accountability for their transgressions against others. They are quick to discredit others and neutralize anyone

who has incriminating information about them.

- **Bully Saboteur:** Saboteur Bullies have an exaggerated belief that they are not receiving their fair share of praise or rewards, and they display highly manipulative tendencies. This bully often demonstrates prejudice and contempt for others and gains gratification when denying other people that to which he/she believes he/she is entitled.

In addition, bullies often have complex and contradictory psychological tendencies that contribute to their high levels of emotional pain, which may take many forms. Some bullies, for example, have persistent feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and insecurity, which results in self-loathing. These children often choose to become bullies to mitigate their feelings of frustration and failure. Others appear to have high self-esteem and use bullying behaviors to solidify their feelings of self-worth. Still other bullies report disliking themselves for behaving like a bully, but don’t have the skills to change their behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Piotrowski, 2003).

The bully’s typically immature emotional stature often results in an inability to empathize with others (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). He/she often shows impatience and anger when placed in situations requiring empathy (Field, 1996). The bully may view anyone attempting to be empathic as vulnerable and, consequently, a potential target. Such perceived weakness might excite the bully into initiating steps to publicly ignore or override the individual’s empathic demonstrations in an effort to test the potential target’s suitability for further bullying. This type of target is referred to as a provocative victim (Olweus, 1993). A target who objects to these initial steps may deter the bully from further advances. As part of this process, bullies rarely apologize or give compliments to others; instead, they are often sarcastic and may have an unnatural need to be recognized. The methods that bullies employ when they interact with others often result in depression and loneliness for them, which only increases their emotional pain.

Finally, bullies often are consumed by fear and jealousy. They often fear facing themselves, losing followers, and losing power over others. Bullies may be jealous of others, because their personal belief system suggests that they are regularly being shortchanged in every aspect of their life. By understanding the types of bullies and their typical psychological attributes, it is easier to effect positive changes in these individuals.

Changing Bullying Behavior in Classrooms

Most anti-bullying programs suggest a variety of methods to effect change. First, the teacher must

establish clear rules on behaviors and consequences, as exemplified in the primary level behavior chart in Figure 1.

When bullies do not follow such rules, most programs suggest that infractions be addressed in private, since privacy deprives bullies of the audience they often seek. In approaching bullies in private, adults must confidently, unwaveringly, and consistently employ the appropriate well-established consequences for the bullying behaviors. The bully needs to be counseled separately, both during and after the incident. Additionally, the bully needs to be provided with better choices for behavior and instructed on how to improve

his or her social interactions. Further, the bully needs to be given concrete words and actions as substitutes for the bullying behavior.

For example, if a child excludes another child from playing with a group at recess, the child needs to understand that this behavior will not be tolerated and that it is a rule that all children are to be included. Explicit instruction should be given to the bully on how to allow all to play and how to actively seek out shy individuals and ask them to join the play. Over time, this positive change in behavior may become more rewarding to bullies than their previous behavior.

Bullies need to be gradually counseled to look within



Figure 1

their own selves toward understanding the reasons for their behaviors. Bullies need to be supported through a process of developing empathy for others and developing a commitment to helping others. Similarly, the target needs counseling in methods to cope with bullying and to avoid becoming a target again.

Most programs further caution against mediating between the bully and the target of bullying because of the imbalance of power. It is believed that such mediation might inflict further emotional pain upon the target. The recommended position of most programs is that mediating a bullying incident might send an inappropriate message to the students who are involved, such as, "You are both partly right and partly wrong" or "We need to work out this conflict between you." The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, "No one deserves to be bullied, and we are going to do everything we can to stop it." The message for children who bully should be, "Your behavior is inappropriate and must stop."

Preventing Children From Becoming Targets and Helping Those Who Are

Anti-bullying programs often suggest that children should have frequent opportunities to engage in discussions with their teachers about their social relationships in school. Using the insights they glean from these discussions, teachers should offer specific guidelines relating to bullying and violence. It should be made clear that bullying can be identified by observing bullying actions towards others and noticing the absence of such behaviors as apologizing, helping, or complimenting others. Often, children describe peers who behave this way as "mean," and teachers should clarify that these behaviors are an indication that the individual may be a bully.

Bullying should be described as those actions individuals take when they do not know how to handle or cope with feelings of depression, inferiority, inadequacy, insecurity, fearfulness, or jealousy. Adults should guide children to understand that targets of bullying have more than likely done nothing to encourage such negative behavior. Instead, such targets are all too often those who exhibit kindness and compassion toward others (Field, 2004). In recognizing such kindness, bullies are often forced to face their own inability to behave in such a manner, and then lash out.

Targets of bullying are often praised for their kindness. This recognition is likely to enrage individuals who feel inclined to bully by increasing, still further, their feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Targets of bullying should be helped to realize that they are probably not the first target of the bully and that they were probably targeted because the bully sensed some

type of vulnerability. Bullies might seek to challenge the target's integrity and unwillingness to compromise a well-defined positive set of values. A bully would rather attack a loner than a member of any clique. Targets also may be those whom the bully believes have a low propensity toward violence, because bullies would rather not select a target who might be inclined to physically fight back. A typical target may be someone who has come to the aid of another target and now is the focus of emotional discontent for a child who is inclined to resort to bullying.

Anti-bullying programs also suggest that guided discussions about bullying and violence should address the types of behavior or violence that bullies impose on their targets. These discussions should include guidance in bystander and peer mediation techniques to resolve conflicts, as well as group discussions with children on what to do in a bullying situation. Some suggestions for addressing these discussions are provided below.

Bystander Behavior and Peer Mediation

While the presence of teachers and behavior charts might assist in limiting bullying inside the classroom, further help is needed to address bullying outside the classroom. One way to address this issue is to discuss the responsibilities of bystanders in dealing with bullies. Standing up for targets is not an easy task. Bystanders may be afraid to stand up to the bully for fear that the bully might turn on them as well. Teachers should explain that they most likely will be targeted by the bully, whether or not they intervene on behalf of a current target. Often, the only sure way to turn around some habitual bullies is through direct confrontation. Children need to understand that everyone is responsible for eliminating bullying and violence. Adults should assure children that bullies will typically stop bullying when two or more people confront them and appropriate consequences are enforced.

After being rebuffed by a group, bullies often claim that *they* are the victim. However, children should be encouraged to not let that reaction sway their insistence that the bullying behaviors must end. Children need the greatest strength and courage to rebuff a bully. Adults should tell them that they will never regret doing so, and that they will receive help. This help may come in the form of exercises designed to assertively rebuff bullying. Children should be cautioned to use strong rebuffs only when they are truly being bullied and if they believe that such tactics will not escalate the situation. Younger children may not completely understand the appropriate time to use these phrases or take action when they feel they are being bullied. Learning to defend oneself from bullying is an ongoing

process. Teacher guidance and understanding during this process is critical. Eventually, children must understand that using these phrases in other contexts may cause the target to appear to *be* the bully. Additionally, if children feel they are in any danger, their first recourse should be to seek help from an adult.

Practical Suggestions for Responding to Bullying

Many anti-bullying programs encourage children to speak up against or reject bullies. Some concrete verbal suggestions, such as those recommended by Field (2004), include:

“When you try to tear me down, it shows that you feel I am better than you.”

“You should work on rising above using sarcasm (ridicule) or being mean.”

“You must be so frustrated trying to make me feel guilty/inferior/humiliated.”

“If you keep bullying me, I will find out who else you are bullying and report it.”

These rebuffs may cause the bully (who often acts opportunistically) to seek a more vulnerable target or abandon bullying altogether. However, an individual who has been bullied for a period of time may have a more difficult time deterring the bully’s behavior. Fortunately, some responses, such as those above, empower the target, no matter how long he or she has been bullied. Still, the target in this situation will need more support and encouragement from the teachers and adults in his or her life to be successful at stopping the bullying cycle. Ups and downs are likely to occur before the bullying stops, as both the bully and target tend to fall easily back into their previous roles. The target must be provided with explicit words and actions to reverse the bullying. The bully must be provided with alternative behavior suggestions and with aversive consequences if bullying behaviors continue. Thus, even the most deeply entrenched bullying cycle may be disrupted.

Many anti-bullying programs encourage targets to use “I messages,” as they can be very effective in deterring a bully (such as, “I don’t like what you are doing and I want you to stop”). A checklist modified for children from one used by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (2004), illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, offers avenues for deterring bullies.

Rehabilitating Bullies

Some suggest that bullies should never be given a second chance or be forgiven (Field, 1996), while others support forgiving the bullying behaviors (Limber & Small, 2003). For young children who first begin

What To Do:

- Ignore the bully’s behavior whenever possible.*
- Use social skills, such as being assertive, negotiating, sharing, taking turns, inviting others to participate, assisting others, and asking for permission.*
- Leave the situation.*
- Rebuff in a firm manner.*
- Protect yourself emotionally and physically (without using retaliation).*
- Request that the bully stop, and then walk away; if this does not work, then tell the teacher.*
- Use humor.*
- Own it (the criticism) by pretending to agree with the bully (this takes the power away from the bully).*
- Spend time in groups.*
- Practice what to say in front of a mirror or with friends.*

Figure 2

What Not To Do:

- Cry or act hurt in front of the bully.*
- Lose your temper.*
- Escalate the situation.*
- Return the aggression.*
- Get others to gang up on the bully.*
- Tease in retaliation.*
- Call the bully names.*
- Bring weapons to school.*

Figure 3

to bully and are immediately rebuffed, there may be great value in peers’ forgiveness. This forgiveness may lead the bully to permanently abandon bullying behaviors, because the bully can gain more acceptance as a different, better individual. Societies should not underestimate children’s ability to understand the bully’s motivations and the role they can play in helping to build up a bully’s potentially fragile psyche, once the bully abandons his or her bullying ways. If peers adopt this approach and are supported by all the adults in the child’s environment, the bully’s be-

havior may further improve. As the bully abandons the bullying behavior, he/she will continue to need assistance in understanding those aspects of his/her personality that would lead to bullying. Further, bullies must be continually supported with explicit, positive alternative behaviors and directions for verbal and physical interactions with peers. Bullies also must be continually reminded that they will be better liked by others, will like themselves more, and will receive greater rewards when they help others.

Rodkin and Hodges (2003) found that teachers who show warmth and kindness to all children in a class make an impact on reducing bullying by providing a positive role model. Kilpatrick-Demaray and Kerres-Malecki (2003) suggest assigning buddies to all students as a preventive step toward reducing bullying in the classroom. Leff et al. (2003) encourage the use of more adults to monitor unstructured school activities, such as lunch and recess, while encouraging peer mediation of conflicts between students.

Conclusion

Bullying should not be considered a “normal” stage of child development. Rather, it should be seen as a precursor for more serious violent behaviors that necessitate immediate and appropriate intervention by a caring adult. Those who bully are four times more likely than non-bullies to be convicted of a serious crime by age 24 (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2007). If we are to make societies safer places for all, schools need to provide leadership by instituting anti-bullying programs that include early intervention, adult training, and school-wide anti-bullying interventions for students (Furlong, Morrison, & Greif, 2003). Our children and our world deserve no less.

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