

Bullying in Children

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When considering bullying, people have mixed feelings. Some view bullying as a regular part of childhood, while others realize the colossal problem it is becoming. Bullying has been a struggle for students for many decades. Research on the topic only began in the 1970's (Olweus, 2003). Literature shows it is estimated that about 160,000 children skip school every day in order to avoid bullying (Coy, 2001). Dan Olweus, defined bullying as "a student being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus, 2003, p. 12). Most definitions of bullying send a similar message; bullying is an action one does to gain power and dominance over another individual.

A bully is an individual who engages in negative actions, intentionally inflicting or attempting to inflict any form of injury or discomfort on another. The term "negative actions" is defined similarly to "aggressive behavior" in the social sciences. The act of bullying can be carried on in various ways, such as physical contact, with words, indirect ways such as mean faces or gestures, spreading of rumors, or intentionally excluding someone from a group (Olweus, 2003). Overall, bullying can be displayed in a physical, verbal, psychological form, or as a combination of the three. An imbalance of strength is fundamental in bullying; bullies tend to choose victims smaller and weaker than they are, victims who are most likely unable to defend themselves.

Two types of bullies that are addressed in the literature: aggressive bullies and passive bullies. Aggressive bullies are individuals that are seen as belligerent, fearless, coercive, confident, tough, and impulsive. Such individuals tend to have low tolerance and a strong inclination towards violence. Passive bullies, on the other hand, are more anxious. They are not ones to provoke others. A passive bully is usually associated with an aggressive bully, as what

we might call a “sidekick”. They tend to support the bully’s behavior and/or participate in the bullying. Passive bullies play a less aggressive role (Coy, 2001).

Bullying tends to occur, for the most part, in the school environment. It tends to take place during elementary school and later peaking in middle school. Research has predicted that, if schools provided more supervision during the hours in which bullying occurs most often free play, recess, noon hour, or on the school bus, bullying would be greatly reduced. Overall, boys tend to bully other students as well as being the target of bullying more often than girls. Furthermore, boys and girls engage in different forms of bullying. Girls use more subtle forms of bullying such as excluding a student from a group, spreading rumors, and/or manipulating relationships, while boys are more physical (Olweus, 2003).

Olweus offered a bullying cycle that shows students modes of reaction and roles in a bullying situation. A bullying situation begins with the bully/bullies who initiate the bullying towards the victim. Followers are students who are known as “henchmen” who take an active part in the bullying but do not initiate it. Supporters/passive bullies are students who support the bullying but do not participate. Passive supporters’ who are also known as possible bullies are those who are fond of the bully but are not open with displaying their support in public. Disengaged onlookers are students who witness bullying but do not do anything to stop it. Possible defenders are those who do not like the bully and feel that they should help, but do not. Lastly, there are the defenders of the victim which are the students who dislike the bullying and help or attempt to help the victim (Olweus, 2003).

Past research has separated aggression in children into two categories, reactive aggression and proactive aggression. Children who express reactive aggression are emotionally driven, and

have hostile aggression. Reactive children also tend to perceive others motives to be hostile towards them. Many of these children are more likely to have suffered abuse at home and/or out of school. On the other hand, children who are prone to proactive aggression engage in unemotional aggression. Their aggression is aimed towards a need or desire they want to be fulfilled (Siegler, et.al, 2011).

The literature indicated three areas that are possible origins for child aggression and bullying; biology, parenting, and environmental factors (Coy, 2001). Without a doubt, a child's biological factors contribute to his or her individual differences (e.g. aggression). In addition, heredity tends to play a strong role in aggression in early childhood and later into adulthood. Similar to bullying, heredity of aggression tends to be more prevalent in boys than girls. Hormonal factors are also assumed to have an effect on a child's aggression. In boys, testosterone levels tend to be related to activity levels and responses to provocation from others. High levels of aggression have also been linked with higher levels of aggression in boys. Overall, "genetic, neurological, or hormonal characteristics may put a child at risk for developing aggression and anti-social behavior," but there are many other factors that contribute (Siegler, et.al, 2011, p. 573).

Child rearing plays an important role in many problem behaviors. Children whose parents who use more harsh physical punishment appear to lead their children to have more social cognition that is associated with aggression, such as seeing others motives as hostile, generating aggressive solutions to problems, and expecting aggression to result in positive outcomes (Siegler, 2011). In addition, children who experience a divorce or embattled parenting are more aggressive and anti-social when compared with other children. It can be assumed that once a troubled marriage has ended, that a child would be relieved from experiencing constant negative

behavior that was being modeled. On the contrary, family transitions such as remarriage or relocating have been shown to lead to more antisocial and delinquent behavior. Also, “for a period of time after a divorce, mothers tend to become less supportive toward their children and to be more inconsistent and authoritarian, and thereby less effective, in controlling their children” (Siegler, 2011). Furthermore, children who come from low income families tend to be more antisocial and aggressive. This can be caused by areas in which they live which have higher levels of family stressors and violent neighborhoods. Most of these children are a part of single parent homes, unplanned pregnancies, teen mothers, and/or gangs related environments.

Common misconceptions regarding bullying are the following: bullying is a consequence of large classrooms, larger schools, competition for grades between students, school failures, poor self esteem in students’ and insecurity. In addition, it is also believed that students who are overweight, wear glasses, are from different ethnic groups, or have different dialects are more prone to bullying than other students. All of these myths lack empirical support. In the literature, research supports that personality traits, reaction responses, and physical strength have a higher correlation with bullying (Olweus, 2003).

In addition, victims of bullying experience psychological side effects and suffer with poor school adjustment. They are also more prone to loneliness, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Peckham, 2007). Long term effects of low self esteem and depression have been observed. Bullies also experience long term effects; they are more likely to be convicted of crimes in their adulthood.

Combating bullying is a difficult task, but with the cooperation of students, parents and teachers a difference could be made. Peckham makes several suggestions that can be

implemented. It is suggested to encourage students to speak up, tell someone about witnessed acts of bullying. Also, it is also suggested for students to take a friend when speaking to a trusted adult in order to create a community of support. When it comes to parents it is suggested to encourage parents to model respectful interactions with their children, talk with their children and create a safe place for them to express their fears and concerns. Parents should pay more attention to warning signs, know their children's friends, and never tell their child to ignore bullying. Lastly, it is suggested to encourage teachers to have discussions about bullying, target interventions on peer groups, respond quickly to acts of bullying, and increase supervision. It is also important for teachers to attend trainings on bullying and how to respond to these situations (Peckham, 2007). In addition to encouraging students, parents, and teachers, schools should also be more involved. Schools should introduce a code of conduct stating clear examples good and bad behaviors, along with respective rewards and sanctions (Coy, 2001). In addition, awareness programs and an increase in school safety such as video cameras can increase the overall protection of students. Involving students will also help reduce bullying, encouraging the reporting of incidence by offering anonymity and developing student watch programs (Coy, 2001).

In conclusion, bullying is a type of aggression that is intended to harm or disturb another individual repeatedly. Types of bullying include aggressive and passive bullies. Bullying occurs mainly in a child's elementary years peaking in middle school. There are three areas that contribute to a child's aggression; biology, parenting, and environmental factors. Several things that can be done to reduce bullying; students, parents, and teachers can be encouraged to take a stand and become proactive, as well as schools becoming more involved. Understanding bullying and what can be done is very important to children's mental health, for both the bully and victim

are suffering, not just short term but long term. The safety of our youth should be the number one priority.

References

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