

The Scoop on Bullying¹

How Do We Define Bullying?

Think back to your childhood days in elementary and middle school. Was there a child who was always left out of the group, perhaps a constant target of teasing? Was there a child or group of children who consistently picked on other kids? What kind of taunts do you recall?

“Don’t eat us, fatso!”

“Hey, look at four-eyes over there!”

“He’ll never be able to throw the ball that far. He’s such a wimp!”

Most of us can probably recall several instances from our childhood school days in which we have witnessed bullying. In fact, we can probably remember instances in which we ourselves were the victims - being picked on by other children - or the bully - taunting other children. Bullying is more common than we realize. Researchers have stated that the percentage of U.S. students, enrolled in grades 6 through 10, who admitted to being involved in bullying (either as bullies, victims, or a combination of both) was 30% (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). It has been reported that as many as 160,000 children stay home from school at least one day a month, due to fear of being victimized or bullied (Mental Health America, 2008). Furthermore, “children who are bullied can develop a poor self-image, become depressed, avoid school, or even carry weapons for protection. And kids who bully are at risk for problems in school and later in life” (Highmark Inc., 2005).

How Do We Define bullying?

Espelage and Swearer (2003) list different types of bullying behavior that researchers have categorized over the years. Categories that they have described include: direct aggression, indirect aggression, and relational aggression.

- Direct aggression refers to physical assaults, threats, and verbal confrontations.
- Indirect aggression refers to rumor spreading and slander.
- Relational aggression can include direct and indirect aggressive acts. Relational aggression refers to actions, such as social exclusion, which are aimed at ruining relationships between the victim and other classmates.

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According to the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL, 2001), it is a common misconception to believe that bullying is normal childhood behavior. Conflicts are a normal part of childhood, but the constant harassment and imbalance of power (referring to the bully dominance/victim helplessness) that characterize bullying set this behavior apart from ordinary clashes.

According to Dake, Price, Telljohann, and Funk (2003), the majority of teachers (85%) surveyed, reported that they intervened to end bullying incidents nearly all the time. The students, however, indicated that only 35% of the bullying incidents were dealt with by teachers. This may be because many incidents last less than a minute are hard to detect. Active supervision is essential .

Who are the Bullies?

How can you identify which children are bullies in your classroom? According to the NWREL (2001), bullies are those children who often engage in tactics, such as teasing and fighting, in an attempt to intimidate or dominate other students. For this reason, they tend to pick on students that are smaller and weaker.

Kerr and Yamnitsky (2005) indicate that gender differences can be found in bullying behaviors. Boys tend to use physical aggression, whereas girls tend to use relational aggression when attempting to dominate other students.

Bullies are often those children who have been exposed to corporal punishment in the household. This partially explains why bullies aim to dominate others using physical violence and other forms of aggression.

Surprisingly, bullies are not always the social outcasts and misfits that appear in the movies. They may get good grades, be well-liked by peers, and most often have middle to high self-esteem (NWREL, 2001).

Who are the Victims?

How can you identify children in your class that are being bullied? According to the NWREL (2001), children who are being bullied are teased, taunted, or harassed in an intimidating manner. They may have few close friends, maintain close proximity with their teachers, and stay clear of secluded places.

How can parents identify if their children are being bullied? Children who come home with unexplained injuries, tattered clothing, damaged or missing property, and try to avoid going to school may be victims of bullying (NWREL, 2001).

Children who are bullied possess no specific physical characteristics, but tend to have low self-esteem (NWREL, 2001; Kerr & Yamnitsky, 2005). Children with special needs or disabilities are also common targets of bullying (Heinrichs, 2003).

Why Do Bullies Bully?

You may be wondering why bullies harass and intimidate other children. What satisfaction do they derive from this behavior? Espelage and Swearer (2003) compiled and described several different theories that have been developed by researchers in an attempt to explain why some kids become bullies. They are as follows:

Social skills deficits- Some bullies may have difficulty processing and encoding social cues, leading to the development and use of anger and aggression as a means to solve social conflicts.

Homophily hypothesis- This explanation refers to a group of friends solidifying their group's identity by displaying similar interests and behaviors. In this sense, a child who belongs to a group that bullies other children and displays high amounts of aggression is more likely to engage in these behaviors as well.

Dominance theory- Students bully in an attempt to dominate and stay on top during the transition from elementary to middle school.

Attraction theory- Bullies are reinforced by their peers, who are attracted to dominant and aggressive children.

Family background- Bullies come from families where conflicts are resolved through aggression and physical punishment.

What Are the Consequences of Bullying?

As you might have surmised, bullying can have serious consequences for both bullies and their victims. Researchers have reported that out of the total number of students who drop out of school each year, 10% make this decision to avoid being bullied (NWREL, 2001). Victims may suffer from anxiety and depression, conditions which may persist even after they reach adulthood (NWREL, 2001). As for bullies, children who bully increase their likelihood of becoming violent criminals offenders; as many as 60% of bullies are expected to be convicted of a crime before reaching their mid 20s (NWREL, 2001).

How Can We Address Bullying in Our Schools?

Based on the prevalence and seriousness of bullying, what can you do to stop it? Most researchers agree that the most effective bullying prevention programs are those that focus on changing the climate of the school and implementing anti-bullying activities in the classrooms (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003).

School-Wide Approaches: According to researchers, the first approach to implementing a school-wide policy regarding bullying is to administer a questionnaire to students, teachers, additional school personnel, and parents regarding the incidence and prevalence of bullying throughout the school. The purpose of this activity is to provide the administration information about the extent of bullying in their school and to aide them in the development of their anti-bullying policies (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; NWREL, 2001).

How Can We Address Bullying in Our Schools?, Continued

A second important component for a successful bullying prevention program - as discussed by Whitted and Dupper (2005) and Hirschstein, et al. (2007) - is that complete implementation and support of anti-bullying policies by the entire school staff and administration is necessary. Bullying prevention programs are often ineffective or less effective if the entire staff does not commit themselves to fully executing them.

Other school-wide strategies for the successful implementation of a bullying prevention program include:

- Creation of a method for reporting bullying behavior in a manner in which the reporter can remain anonymous (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).
- Provide better supervision in all areas of the school, especially those in which bullying incidents occur most often (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; NWREL, 2001; Heinrichs, 2003; and Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003).
- Develop standard disciplinary procedures and consequences for bullies and administer them consistently (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Heinrichs, 2003).
- Develop a committee or team to evaluate and enforce implementation of the program (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003).
- Have a conference day devoted to the discussion of bullying awareness and prevention tactics (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003).
- Establish a method or procedure for evaluating the progress or success rate of the program (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

Classroom Strategies: An important way for teachers to address bullying at the classroom level is to incorporate anti-bullying themes into their curriculum (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; NWREL, 2001; Heinrichs, 2003). To accomplish this task it is recommended that teachers set up periodic class meetings to discuss important bullying issues. Researchers suggest that students and teachers collaborate to create anti-bullying rules for the classroom (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Heinrichs, 2003). According to Heinrichs (2003) three good anti-bullying rules to start out with are:

- Students must promise not to bully others.
- Students must stand up for those who are being bullied.
- Students must refrain from leaving other students out of their games, teams, activities, etc.

Another important strategy that teachers can execute at the classroom level is to teach children, through role-playing activities, how to deal with real-life bullying situations that may arise in the future (NWREL, 2001). Teach bystanders how to intervene and stand up for children who are frequently victims of bullying. Even simple strategies (standing or walking close to a victim, asking the victim a question, or using humor with a bully) have shown to stop bullying incidents.

References

CSAP's Prevention Pathways: Online Courses. (n.d.). The ABC's of bullying: Addressing, blocking, curbing school aggression. http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/bully/bully_intro_pg1.htm

PPS Vice-principals and many principals have taken Module I of this free on-line course that teaches all about bullying. In addition, this website offers case studies, and handouts for teachers, parents and students. Check it out!

Dake, J. A., Price, J. H., Telljohann, S. K., & Funk, J. B. (2003). Teacher perceptions and practices regarding school bullying prevention. *Journal of School Health, 73*(9), 347-355. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from the Academic Search Premier (via EBSCO) database.

This particular study focuses on the importance of teachers having an active role in preventing and intervening in instances of bullying.

Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: What have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review, 32*(3), 365-383. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from the Academic Search Premier (via EBSCO) database.

This journal article explores and summarizes research done on various aspects of bullying and categories of different "insights" about bullying.

Heinrichs, R. R. (2003). A whole-school approach to bullying: Special considerations for children with exceptionalities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 38*(4), 195-204. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from the Academic Search Premier (via EBSCO) database.

This article addresses the dilemma that children with special needs or developmental delays often find themselves victims of the cruel act of bullying. The article summarizes effective components that comprise many prevention programs.

Highmark Inc. (2005). *Highmark Health High Five: Tackle Bullying*. Retrieved January 13, 2009, from <http://www.highmarkhealthyhigh5.org/parents/index.shtml>.

This website provides basic information about bullying, bullying prevention tips for parents and resources on bullying, including posters and video clips.

Hirschstein, M. K., Schoiack Edstrom, L. V., Frey, K. S., Snell, J. L., & MacKenzie, E. P. (2007). Walking the talk in bullying prevention: Teacher implementation variables related to initial impact of the *Steps to Respect* program. *School Psychology Review, 36*(1), 3-31. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from the Academic Search Premier (via EBSCO) database.

This article presents the results of how teacher implementation of the *Steps to Respect* program reduced bullying behavior. The authors states that many bullying prevention or intervention programs are ineffective because the programs are rarely evaluated.

References, Continued

Kerr, M. M., & Nelson, C. M. (2006). *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom, 5th Edition*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.

This book contains a number of helpful strategies for addressing problematic behaviors in the classroom. It includes a chapter outlining Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions (PBIS) and the three different levels of interventions (school/classroom, targeted groups, and individual).

Kerr, M. M., & Yamnitsky, J. (2005). *Bullying: An overview for educators*. Retrieved March 10, 2008, as a Microsoft Word document.

This article contains basic facts about bullying. The authors offer helpful suggestions on how to determine if bullying is a problem in your school, and how to effectively communicate to students and parents.

Mental Health America. (2008). *Bullying: What to do about it*. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from <http://www.nmha.org/index.cfmobjectid=CA866DBF-1372-4D20-C817AE97DDF77E4E>

This article describes basic and general elements of bullying. The implications of bullying, as they pertain to both bullies and victims, are also discussed. teaching children how to stand up for themselves and for other victims.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). (2001). *Schoolwide prevention of bullying*. Retrieved March 10, 2008, from <http://www.nwrel.org/request/dec01/textonly.html>

This website contains factual information about bullying, such as the characteristics of bullies and victims, effective methods for resolving and preventing bullying issues, and legislation that has been created to help promote a safer environment for children in schools throughout the country.

National Parent Teacher Association (PTA). (2008). *Safeguarding your children from bullying, gangs, and sexual harassment*. Retrieved March 10, 2008, from <http://www.pta.org/1179.htm>

This site offers information for helping kids avoid becoming victims or targets of bullying, sexual harassment, and gang violence.

Whitted, K. S., & Dupper, D. R. (2005). Best practices for preventing or reducing bullying in schools. *Children & Schools*, 27(3), 167-175. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from the Academic Search Premier (via EBSCO) data base.

This journal article provides valuable information about bullying, its implications, and intervention programs designed to extinguish this behavior. The appendix summarizes three existing programs (*Bully-Proofing Your School*, *Bully-Proofing Prevention Program*, and *Steps To Respect*).