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SAFE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES SECTION



Bullying

Bullying is a form of aggression in which a person repeatedly harasses another person physically and/or psychologically. It is a serious and widespread problem in schools with long-term consequences for both the bully and the victim. Both individuals are at risk of academic failure, dropping out, and functioning below their capacity as adults. The problem has gone relatively unrecognized in the United States; however, Scandinavia, Japan, and England have taken a leading role in research on bullying or "mobbing." In those countries, prevention programs have been developed partly due to an increase in the number of childhood suicides directly linked to victimization by bullies.

Facts about bullying:

- **Of second graders identified as bullies, 65 percent had felony convictions by age 24.** (*Johnson Institute, 1996*)
- **Of boys identified as bullies in middle school, 60 percent had at least one conviction and 35-40 percent had three or more convictions by age 23.** (*Limber, National School Safety Center, 1996*)
- **Bullies are more likely to abuse their wives, use harsh physical discipline to punish their children, and raise children to be bullies.** (*Hodges & Perry, National School Safety Center, 1996*)
- **Thirty to forty percent of children are involved in bullying at some period in their lives, either as bullies or victims.** (*Johnson Institute, 1996*)

Unfortunately, the patterns for aggressive behavior are already well established by the age of eight.

Facts about victims:

- **One in five students is at risk for victimization.** (*Batsche, 1995*)
- **Victims frequently suffer depression and severe self-esteem problems well into adulthood.** (*Hodges & Perry, National School Safety Center, 1996*)

- **Many male victims report difficulty in cultivating relationships with women once they reach adulthood.** (*Gilmartin, 1987*)

Thirty to forty percent of children are involved in bullying at some period in their lives, either as bullies or victims.



Is bullying different from peer conflict?

Yes, bullying is different from peer conflict. It is conflict between individuals that do not share equal physical and/or psychological power. Bullies are usually physically stronger and victims are usually perceived as weaker and unable to protect themselves. Harassment can be direct or indirect, physical or verbal.

Direct forms of bullying:

- **Physical attacks**
- **Name-calling, insults**
- **Extortion (frequently of lunch money, clothing, and hand-held video games)**
- **Threats**
- **An unwelcomed touch**

Indirect forms of bullying:

- **Repeated exclusion**
- **Rejection**
- **Disapproving looks**
- **Gossiping**

Two new forms of bullying can be added to the list: sexual and racial. Sexual bullying manifests as sexual comments, jokes, looks, gestures, unwelcomed sexual advances, touching or grabbing in a sexual way, and accusations of homosexuality and lesbianism. Some literature suggests that girls viewed as unattractive or unstylish dressers or who are physically well-developed are more at risk for sexual bullying.

Racial bullying includes name-calling, ostracism and includes all of the bullying behaviors mentioned above. Sexual and racial bullying is damaging in that it is applied not only to the victim but refers to victims' families and to an entire race or gender. Such behavior grows into social racism and sexism.



Who Bullies Whom?

Boys bully more than girls and typically bully younger children. This is especially prevalent in elementary schools. Middle school students, however, are particularly notorious for vicious bullying behavior. Boys are three to four times more likely to use direct bullying and inflict physical assault than girls. Boys primarily bully other boys, but research indicates that boys bully girls quite frequently as well.

Girls tend to be more psychologically manipulative in their bullying than boys, using tactics of social isolation, ostracism, and rumors. Girls more often bully peers of the same age. Verbal bullying such as name-calling and insults is widespread for both sexes.

Teachers are another population subject to being bullied. **In fact, 28 percent of public school teachers reported being verbally abused; 15 percent have been threatened with injury, and 3 percent were physically attacked.** (Johnson, L.D., 1993)



Types of Bullies

There are two types of bullies: proactive and reactive.

The proactive aggressive child:

- **Behaves in a non-emotional, controlled, deliberate manner;**
- **Seeks internal feeling of control and power.**

The reactive aggressive child:

- **Is emotional and impulsive;**
- **Sees threats where none exist and interprets these as provocation, e.g., misinterprets an innocent brush as a blatant attack;**
- **Feels constantly threatened and believes his/her aggression is justified.**

Bullies are frequently unaware of how aggressive they are. In fact, they consistently see other children as more aggressive than they. They have immature thinking patterns and may think in simple, one-way directives, such as "Give that to me." Because their conflict-management skills are low, they resort to anger and aggression to solve problems.

Managing bullying behavior can be challenging because

- **When a bully is in control, he/she often feels *more* secure and *less* anxious.**

- Many bullies report that they *enjoy* dominating others
- Bullies may have *scant empathy* for others
- Bullies process the suffering they are inflicting in a *rigid and automatic fashion*.

It could be that some of these children have already been so oppressed that they have separated from the more humane aspects of themselves. Although ultimately it is their own pain and fear that initiates the aggressive behavior, this cannot always be reached in a counseling setting. Other techniques may need to be employed to assist bullies in overcoming their aggressive tendencies.



Families of bullies

At home, bullies learn aggression through witnessing aggression or by being abused themselves.

- Bullies witness fathers abusing mothers, or they observe other forms of violence at home;
- Bullies are bullied themselves by a parent;
- Bullies are taught that aggression is an effective means to obtain a goal;
- Bullies learn aggression by other means, such as watching violent television programs.

Bullies come from homes where any of the following parenting styles tend to occur:

- Parents ignore children;
- Parents are unaware of what is happening in their children's lives;
- Parents use extreme and inconsistent discipline techniques, e.g., punishing harshly for some infractions and not at all, for others;
- Parents prefer physical means of discipline;
- Parents submit to children bullying them.



Victims

There are two types of victims: passive and provocative.

Passive victims:

- Internalize problems;
- React to bullying with avoidance, withdrawal, and escape; or
- Maintain safety by skipping school, avoid places at school (especially rest rooms), avoid school activities and functions, run away, and suicide.

Twenty-five percent of 6-12 graders reported skipping school, avoiding certain places at school, staying away from school-related events, or taking circuitous routes to school, for fear of being victimized. (NCES, 1995)

Provocative victims:

- **Externalize problems;**
- **Can be argumentative, disruptive, pushy, and irritating;**
- **Are quick to blame others;**
- **React to bullying through anger and violence; and/or**
- **May bring weapons to school for self-defense.**

Provocative victims are considered most at-risk and usually have an extremely difficult time making friends.

Victims tend to be the same kids year after year. Chronic abuse from peers is linked to a wide variety of adjustment problems and negative behavior including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness, chronic disruptiveness, violence towards others, and suicide. In one study (Gilmartin, 1987), eighty percent of heterosexual men who were victimized as children, had great difficulty in progressing beyond casual contact and interaction with the opposite sex.

Contrary to popular belief, children are seldom victimized because of a physical attribute such as red hair, glasses, or blemishes. Rather, children that indicate they can not defend themselves are the targets of aggressive behavior. The only physical feature which *is* predictive of victimization seems to be *physical weakness*.

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Bullies are able to maintain control over victims because most victims:

- **Submit to peer demands easily - hand over lunch money or give up resources;**
- **Are ineffectual fighters;**
- **Display signs of distress - crying, shouting, whining.**
- **Have poor social skills, e.g. use inappropriate group entry tactics, lack humor, or don't have a clear understanding of how to relate to others.**

The lack of friends and social skills, however, are two of the most significant risk factors for victims. Friends provide protection (*bullies are less likely to pick on children if they have to contend with others as well*); opportunities to acquire social skills; emotional support; and self-validation. Widespread peer rejection legitimizes bullying behavior which is further reinforced when teachers harbor negative feelings for the victim. "As teachers, we must put our own feelings aside," cautions **Rick Frederick, Instructional Support Teacher in Orange County**. "We must be advocates for these kids and remember that they've been deeply hurt and desperately need our help."



Families of Victims

At home, victims may be overprotected or may experience dynamics similar to those in families of bullies.

Victims may come from homes where:

- **One parent is overprotective and the child has trouble separating from the parent.**
- **Mothers may treat boys as younger than their age, and fathers may be distant and critical.**
- **Parents may be hostile toward each other and/or the children.**
- **Parents may issue harsh and inconsistent discipline.**



What can schools do?

Schools can be instrumental in combating bullying. By far, the most effective tool for keeping schools safe is to involve everyone in creating and maintaining a caring culture. Aggressive behavior can be deterred by placing power in the hands of the caring majority.

To do this, the school must develop a school-wide plan designed to combat the problem. A first step to this may be to:

- **Conduct a school-wide assessment of bullying to determine:**
 - ◇ prevalence of the problem;
 - ◇ types of bullying behavior;
 - ◇ time and location of bullying incidents;
 - ◇ student attitudes on bullies and victims;
 - ◇ student perceptions on how school handles bullies;
 - ◇ student ideas on solving the problem;
 - ◇ staff perception and attitudes on bullying.

It is not the number of children in a classroom, their socio-economic status, or the size of the class that determines bullying. The primary determinant is the ***climate*** of the school. Are opportunities available for bullying to take place? (Fried, 1996)

- **Develop policy and a school code of conduct with special provision on bullying**
 - ◇ Include students in the development of the code.
 - ◇ Adopt a policy of zero tolerance for bullying

- **Train staff**
 - ◇ Involve all school personnel in your training: teachers, playground aids, bus drivers, cafeteria personnel, students, and so on. (*Many bullying incidents **do not** take place in the classroom*)
 - ◇ Include in your training:
 - ⇒ sharing time for staff to discuss fears, reservations, or beliefs about intervening;
 - ⇒ scenarios for practicing intervention; and
 - ⇒ methods for integrating bullying instruction with curricula.
 - ◇ Develop a school team comprised of those good at consoling victims with those good at confronting bullies. (*Include SAP teams.*)

- **Train bullies and victims**
 - ◇ *For bullies, schools should:*
 - ⇒ Provide consequences;
 - ⇒ Teach skills to replace aggressive behavior with appropriate behavior;
 - ⇒ Provide individual and group counseling;
 - ◇ Involve parents and specific peer groups.
 - ◇ *For victims, schools should*
 - ⇒ Provide assertiveness training and support groups;
 - ⇒ Teach friendship-making skills;
 - ⇒ Develop self-esteem;
 - ⇒ Involve parents.

- **Consistently enforce rules against bullying:**
 - ◇ ***Intervene immediately*** and provide direct and unbiased consequences for bullying.

Children must know that school personnel will intervene and will do so immediately. Even though students may know the bullies and the victims, the large majority will not intervene because they are too frightened, may think the victim deserves it, or may feel that the school will not support them. Children **will** report bullying if they know staff will intervene, and they **will** intervene on behalf of the victim if given the skills to do so.

- **Dispel myths and promote facts such as:**
 - ◇ Bullying can not be ignored.
 - ◇ Conflict is a normal part of growing up, but fighting and aggressive behavior are **not**. These are learned responses to conflict.
 - ◇ Victims need protection, security, and training. They cannot cope alone.

- **Develop programs that address bullying behavior:**
 - ◇ Provide school-wide anti-bullying programs and school-wide social skills training which change attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about bullying;
 - ◇ Incorporate anti-bullying concepts into curriculum;
 - ◇ Provide a hot-line for students to report incidents anonymously;
 - ◇ Promote pledges not to bully other students, not to exclude people, to help those being bullied by speaking out and to get adult help;
 - ◇ Teach strategies to use if someone is bullying you or another;
 - ◇ Catch youngsters in the “act of caring.”

Rick Frederick of Orange County has had success in combating bullying with conflict resolution programs, peer mediation, and support groups. He says, “You need a way to empower bullies that doesn’t involve aggressive behavior. You can take that strong personality and turn that bully into a school leader.” Some former bullies in Orange County are now being recognized for breaking up campus fights and leading violence prevention programs. Frederick says that victim support groups have been very beneficial. He says, “Victims can learn social skills, but a support group gives them a place to get support. They can’t do it alone.”

For any anti-bullying program to be successful,
power must shift from the bully to the caring
student body and adults.



The Florida Institute of Education has a Resource Library and can conduct searches for further information on bullying. Contact:

Florida Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project
Florida Institute of Education / University of North Florida
320 Blount Street, Suite 410
Tallahassee, Florida 32301

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