

Bullying: Intervention and Prevention Strategies for Schools

Bullying occurs at varying intensities in every schoolyard. It is estimated that on average, about 15 per cent of children are involved in repeat bully-victim problems, with 9 per cent being victims, and about 7 per cent being repeat bullies. More students in younger grades are victimized than in older grades, and bullies tend to be older than their victims.

While some adults tend to dismiss bullying as an inevitable occurrence among children, something which children must learn to deal with on their own, this view is giving way to greater concern about the negative impact of bullying. Research in Norway, England and Canada points to the negative impact of bullying on victims and school climate and to negative long-term out-comes for bullies themselves. Concerted efforts to address and prevent bullying at school have been shown to reduce bullying dramatically, while at the same time decreasing vandalism and increasing respect for teachers and peers.

What is Bullying? _____

Bullying can be defined as repeated and systematic harassment and attacks on others. Bullying can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, and takes many forms, including: minor or major physical violence; threats; verbal taunts; name-calling; put-downs; extortion of money, lunches or possessions; and persistent and unwarranted exclusion from the peer group. Racially or ethnically based verbal abuse and gender-based harassment are also frequently associated with bullying.

Dynamics of Bully-Victim Interactions _____

Victims tend to be quiet, more passive children who do not respond assertively when approached in an aggressive manner. Repeat victims are sometimes children who lack social support in school, or belong to marginalized groups. Some studies have identified a category of "provocative" victims who lack social skills and who also bully others weaker than themselves. Bullies were once thought to have low self esteem, but recent research tends to indicate that many bullies have normal or high self esteem and lack empathy for others. They often use bullying to show off to a group of followers, and enjoy exercising control over their victims. They may be exposed to modeling of aggressive behaviour at home or by older peers. Some bullies are perfectly behaved in class, with good social skills, while on the schoolyard they use their good social skills to bully and to avoid detection by adults.

Why Be Concerned About Bullying? _____

Victims of bullying can develop depression, extreme anxiety, and school refusal or avoidance as a direct result of bullying. They often have trouble concentrating on school work and suffer low self esteem. Victims are typically afraid or ashamed to tell their parents or teachers about the bullying, and so they suffer in silence.

Bullies have been shown to be at greatly elevated risk of involvement in illegal activities and person offences as teens and young adults. If no intervention occurs, their behaviour can easily become entrenched and increasingly serious.

School-Wide Approaches _____

Dr. Dan Olweus, a Norwegian researcher, directed an intensive, nation-wide anti-bullying campaign in Norway, and evaluated the effects. He found that with a collaborative effort, involving all school personnel, parents, and students, bullying was reduced fifty per cent after the intervention. Measures which were found to be effective include:

1. Awareness and involvement on the part of adults.
2. An initial survey of bully-victim problems.
3. A school conference day devoted to bully-victim problems.
4. Better supervision during recess and lunch hour by adults.
5. Consistent and immediate consequences for aggressive behaviour.
6. Generous praise for pro-social and helpful behaviour by students.
7. Specific class rules against bullying (developed by students with teacher guidance).
8. Class meetings about bullying.
9. Serious individual talks with bullies and with victims.
10. Talking with parents of both bullies and victims.
11. A meeting of the school parent-teacher organization on the topic of bullying. *(This might involve school councils in our context).*

Improving School Climate by Addressing Bullying _____

Dr. Debra Pepler, a researcher on bullying and Director of the Lamarsh Centre for Conflict Resolution studies at York University found that when bullying is not addressed, school climate suffers dramatically.

It is difficult to achieve a safe, welcoming and inclusive learning environment when children know bullying is not effectively addressed at their school. Dr. Pepler recommends the following measures, in addition to the steps advocated by Dr. Olweus:

1. Emphasize/implement a curriculum which promotes communication, friendship, and assertiveness skills.
2. Improve communication among school administrators, teachers, parents and students.
3. Listen respectfully to bullying concerns raised by students, parents, and school staff.
4. Avoid sex role stereotyping (e.g. males need to be strong and tough).
5. Avoid emphasis on competitiveness at school.
6. Enlist classmates to help alleviate the plight of victims and to include them in group activities.

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Resources, Further Reading:

1. Garrity, C. (1994). **Bullyproofing your school**. Boston: Sopris West.
2. Olweus, D. (1993). **Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do**. U.K.: Blackwell Publishers.
3. Pepler, D. J., Craig, W. M., Ziegler, S. & Charach, A. (1994). An evaluation of an anti-bullying intervention in Toronto schools. **Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health**, Vol. 13, No. 2.
4. Sudermann, M. (1996). **Teacher Resource Section on Bullying**. London Family Court Clinic.