Bullying in Schools

Definition:

Bully – an individual who abuses others on a routine basis either verbally or physically. Types of bullies include: verbal, physical, relational and reactive. The first two are self-explanatory. Relational bullies rely on persuasion to induce the rejection or exclusion of their victims. Reactive bullies employ provocation and retaliation tactics.

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that creates a negative learning environment. Whether the action is direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is physical or psychological intimidation that occurs repeatedly over time to produce an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

Abusive students demonstrating bullying tactics disrupt every school. This unacceptable behavior provides an uncomfortable atmosphere for students and teachers. The repercussions of bullying can have lifelong negative consequences for the victim, bully and bystander (Banks, 1997). This particular form of antisocial behavior is detrimental to all involved.

Tattum and Tattum (1992) define bullying as “the willful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress.”

Bullying engenders six major characteristics. Intent to harm represents the primary trait. The perpetrator finds pleasure in taunting or trying to dominate the victim and continues even when the victim’s distress is obvious.

Intensity and duration comprise the second trait. The bullying continues over a long period of time and the degree of bullying is damaging to the self-esteem of the victim.

The third component is power. The bully has power over the victim due to age, size, strength or gender. This component is directly linked to the fourth element – vulnerability of the victim. The victim is more sensitive to teasing, cannot adequately defend himself/herself and has physical and/or psychological qualities that make him/her more prone to victimization.

The fifth characteristic is lack of support. The victim feels isolated and exposed; frequently, the victim is afraid to complain for fear of retaliation.

Long-term consequences denote the final trait. The damage to the victim is long-lasting and leads the victim to markedly withdraw from school or to become aggressive
(Weinhold, 2000; Ingram, 2000; Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1993). The ramifications of such behavior can be severe and, in some extreme cases, lead to suicide.

It is estimated that a bullying incident occurs approximately once every seven minutes in the average school (Olweus, 1993). The National Education Association estimates that 160,000 children skip school every day due to fear of violence or intimidation by other students (Borba, 2001). The bullying rate appears to be the same, irrespective of class or school size; however, rural schools reflect a higher rate of bullying than urban or suburban schools (Olweus, 1993). The reasons for this are unclear.

While bullies can be of either gender, boys engage in bullying behavior and are victims of bullies more frequently than girls (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Nolin, Davies & Chandler, 1995; Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Recent research reveals that girls have become more involved in violent crime in the past decade (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999). Gender differences are also reflected in weapon choices: boys overwhelmingly favor guns, while girls choose knives (Girls Incorporated, 1996). Most aggressive acts in schools are perpetrated by males and aimed at males. The results of one pertinent study indicate that 18% of boys carry weapons to school while only 5% of girls do so (Flannery, 1997).

Studies identify four major types of bullying behavior:

- Physical bullies are action-oriented. This behavior is demonstrated by any act of physical violence or the taking and/or damaging of another’s property.
- Verbal bullies use words to hurt or humiliate others. Racist comments, name-calling and insults characterize this behavior.
- Relational bullies employ persuasion to convince peers to exclude or reject others. This tactic can be devastating to the victim – damaging self-esteem and socialization skills.
- Reactive bullies use taunts to provoke others and then retaliate by claiming self-defense. These are often the most difficult to identify (Clifford, 2001).

The research into bullying delineates a multitude of risk factors which influence the behavior. The family environment represents the key element. The home is the most violent place in the United States (Straus, 1994). Children from violent homes are three
to four times more likely to become bullies. The majority of home violence directed at young children comes from the mother and older siblings (Straus & Gelles, 1988).

There are three primary predictive family factors: a lack of solid bonding/attachment with the child, poor supervision and neglect of the child’s needs and the acceptance and modeling of aggressive or bullying behaviors by parents or older siblings (Weinhold & Weinhold, 2000; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Olweus, 1993). Children from dysfunctional families in which there is relatively little caring between family members are much more likely than others to engage in bullying activities (Rigby, 1993, 1994). Parental attitudes condemning bullying and positive family relations constitute a significant part in developing in children a propensity not to bully others (Rigby, 1993, 1994; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Personality factors provide another significant aspect. The best-documented individual child factor in bullying is temperament. Children with an impulsive temperament are more inclined to develop into bullies (Olweus, 1994). Bullies often have attachment disorders (Weinhold, 2000). Boys physically larger or stronger than their peers are more likely to become bullies (Olweus, 1993). Bullies wish to dominate and assert their power. They want to win at any cost (Olweus, 1993). Bullies crave attention and use aggressive behavior to obtain it (Ingram, 2000). They lack empathy and believe that the victim provoked the attack (Olweus, 1993, 1994). Bullying is a subtype of aggression (Olweus, 1993).

Bullying robs an individual of dignity and self-esteem. Longitudinal research on aggressive children reveals a poor prognosis for healthy development (Olweus, 1999; Rigby, 1996; Farmer & Cadwaller, 2000; Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Bullies tend to become aggressive adults with a much higher than average chance of obtaining multiple criminal convictions (Olweus, 1979; Robins, 1978; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Jaffe, 1996; Clifford, 2001). By age 24, 60% of identified bullies have a criminal conviction (Clifford, 2001). Young children labeled as bullies by peers required more support as adults from government agencies, had a higher alcoholism rate, more anti-social personality disorders and used more mental health services than others (Clifford, 2001).

Bullying is one of the most underrated and enduring problems in schools today (Clifford, 2001). The negative impact and emotional scars from bullying can last a lifetime.
Bullies tend to concentrate on shy, unassertive individuals exploiting their vulnerabilities (Charach, Pepler & Ziegler, 1995). These children generally have poor socialization skills and lack confidence in their abilities – bullies hone in on these insecurities (Rigby & Slee, 1993; Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993). These victims experience significant psychological harm which impedes their social, emotional and academic development (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1994; Batsche & Knoff, 1994).

Children who are repeatedly victimized frequently see suicide as their only escape (Clifford, 2001; Rigby, 1996). A survey study done in the Midwest by Oliver, Hoover and Hazler (1994) revealed that a majority felt that victims were partially responsible for bringing the bullying on themselves. Charach, Pepler and Ziegler (1995) found that students regarded victims as “weak”, “nerds” and “afraid to fight back.”

The real danger occurs when children accept these labels and begin to see themselves as worthless (Maxwell, 2000). Children who are victimized report symptoms of depression and loss of interest in activities (Slee, 1995; Craig, 1997). Anxiety in the form of tenseness, fear and worry is also recorded (Neary & Joseph, 1994; Slee, 1995). Conformity is high on the list of children’s priorities and rejection, for whatever reason, is particularly painful. Children must be taught how to set strong, clear verbal boundaries in a respectful way with others.

The Secret Service Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) studied 37 school shootings between 1974 and 2000. Findings in several of the incidents revealed that victims or shooters had exhibited bullying behavior prior to the violent act (Dunn, 2001).

Recently a rather new form of bullying has emerged: cyber-bullying. Online bullies resort to a variety of tactics: web pages ridiculing unpopular students, insulting or threatening email, hurtful, inappropriate instant messaging, etc. Due to the relative anonymity the web provides, online bullying is often more scathing and offensive. Bullies feel secure in their ability to avoid identification. They hide under the protection of the First Amendment. This type of harassment can be extremely difficult for schools to counter or prevent. Future laws may offer some relief.

Schools must advocate a proactive approach to identify and prevent bullying. Research literature posits that most bullying begins in elementary school, peaks in middle school and declines in high school (Olweus, 1993; Farver, 1996; Snyder, Horsch & Childs, 1997). Fifth and sixth graders are in transitional stages which render them
vulnerable (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). A significant finding from a recent study demonstrates a strong correlation between bullying and popularity among sixth grade males (Espelage, Bosworth & Simon, 2001). Other studies expose a wide gap between the amount of bullying students report they endure and the amount of bullying their teachers observe (Vladero, 1997).

For the past few years administrators at Deming Middle School have been employing techniques advocated by the Boys and Girls Town Well-Managed Classroom Program to eliminate undesirable school behaviors. Principal Michael Chavez and Assistant Principal Denise Ruttle expressed approval of and confidence in this school-wide initiative. This program encourages clear expectations and positive behaviors within a positive learning environment. As evidenced by the attached graph, discipline referrals have drastically decreased – from 1,626 in 2003-2004 to 571 in 2005-2006. This impressive decrease in problem behaviors is predicated by placing responsibility on students to account for their social/academic behaviors and thus increase time for academic instruction. As stated previously, most researchers concur that bullying activities peak in middle school. The Well-Managed Classroom Program is specifically designed to counter this unhealthy, negative behavior at the optimal age in childhood development.

Most researchers posit that early intervention provides the essential element to eliminate this negative behavior (Olweus, 1993; Brigham & Kauffman, 1998; Clifford, 2001). A variety of strategies are suggested. First and foremost is the establishment of a Zero Tolerance Policy for bullying behavior (Olweus, 1991; Jaffe, 1996; Sjostrom & Stein, 1996; Rigby, 1997). There is clear unambiguous evidence that school action can dramatically reduce bullying incidents (Cleary, 1999; Olweus, 1993; Clifford, 2001). The policy must be enforced. Students need to be informed and educated in how to respond in bullying situations. Students must know that teachers and administration will act. Trust is imperative. Fairness and confidentiality must be paramount (Nixon, 2001; Ingram, 2000; Dunn, 2001).

Schools should incorporate this policy in a Safe School Plan. Parental involvement is crucial. Training in anger management, mediation, stress relief and conflict resolution should be available to students, families and staff (Chandler, 2001). Research has shown that conflict resolution programs work (Beane, 1999). Education in cooperative learning techniques and multicultural awareness can effectively reduce bullying incidents
Chandler (2001) advocates building tolerance and empathy for others as essential qualities to deter bullying. The most effective tool for dealing with bullies is to mobilize the majority of students who are neither victims nor bullies to oppose bullying activities. An alert, assertive attitude can help possible victims and stop most bullying before it begins. These students have the potential to significantly reduce bullying simply by condemning such behavior (Rigby, 1996; Dunn, 2001).

No single method will be successful in preventing bullying behavior. The dynamics of the victim/bully relationship dictate the appropriate response required to modify the negative behavior. The seriousness of all levels of behavior should be evaluated based on the harm to the victim and the frequency of the offense.

Bullying exists in all schools. It is an unacceptable behavior that must be acknowledged and should not be tolerated. Bullying can have a lifelong negative effect for both the victim and the bully. The damage to a victim's self-esteem can be irreparable. Victims can be denied positive achievements in academic, social and psychological development. Bullies can become locked into negative behavior leading to arrested development. Several studies suggest that bullying may be an early sign of the development of violent tendencies, delinquency and criminality (Olweus, 1993).

Comprehensive proactive programs involving teachers, school staff, students, parents and community members should be established to facilitate identification, prevention and intervention strategies for bullies. There are a number of promising programs available which target delinquent and at-risk adolescents. Students should be aware of and educated in their school No Bullying Policy. The development of a system to reinforce prosocial behavior is vital. Children need to know that they have options and that adults do care. No child should ever feel isolated or alone.

Elimination of this behavior can be aided by training in conflict resolution, anger management, problem-solving, building social skills, leadership training and intervention techniques. One of the best solutions may be to encourage non-bullying students to condemn bullying behavior and to include victims in group activities.

Schools should continually strive to educate students in diversity. Multicultural awareness, tolerance and empathy for others is essential in reducing bullying. This is a problem that is detrimental to all children, and by extension, to society. Individuals
copy the behavior of others through processes of imitation, reciprocity and complementarity (Cairns, 1979). It is imperative that we make every effort possible to prevent and curb antisocial behavior and provide children with positive healthy role models. All children have a basic right to feel secure in a safe learning environment.

Schools must practice a philosophy of tolerance for diversity and strict accountability for abusive behavior in order to provide a safe, nurturing environment conducive to learning. This secure atmosphere will enable all students to effectively cope, adjust and respond to the problems and issues prevalent in everyday life (Search Institute, 1996).
Bibliography


