

## Bullying and COVID19: How Teachers Deal with New Bullying Manifestations in Their Classes

- by Barry Edwards McNamara, Ed.D.

### Abstract

Considerable time and effort has been expended in order to open schools safely during the pandemic. However, it may be difficult to implement bullying prevention programs during this crisis. We have seen new manifestations of bullying during the pandemic and it is important that anti-bullying programs continue to be implemented with fidelity and not be neglected or minimized. The purpose of this article was to understand how teachers were coping with this dilemma. In order to ascertain this information, 25 teachers from a graduate level seminar were provided with an opportunity to share their concerns, issues, and problems in meeting the social emotional needs of their students, and specifically bullying prevention. Information was gathered through Zoom meetings and written products. Recommendations were developed based on these discussions and a review of the related research literature.

### INTRODUCTION

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws that deal with bullying and harassment. Yet, there is a dearth of research on the content of this legislation (Stickl Haugen et al., 2020) and the effectiveness of the implementation of these laws vary (Gale, 2019). In addition, teachers are charged with ensuring that all of their students can learn in a safe environment that is free from bullying and harassment.

Bullying can be defined as an imbalance of power, where the bullies repeatedly target their victims and hurt them in physical or emotional ways. Bullies are adept at identifying their most vulnerable classmates (Olweus, 1993). A great deal has been written about increasing anxiety among students prior to and during COVID 19. These students who are virtual or hybrid learners can become easy victims. Bullying and the unpredictable experiences of this school year make it challenging for teachers to strike the right balance between academic and social emotional learning.

There was a considerable body of research on bullying prevention programs that enable schools to identify bullying, identify victims and provide evidenced based interventions (Olweus, 1993; Garrity, et al., 2004; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). These interventions can be very effective, but the nature of bullying has changed during the pandemic and schools need to be aware of these changes. Cyberbullying has increased (Gordon, 2020) and new manifestations of bullying have emerged and will continue to do so (McNamara, 2020). This article will address these new concerns through the lens of the daily experiences of teachers in dealing with bullying during a pandemic. Recommendations will be provided for the 2021-2022 school year when there is an expectation that more students will return to in person classes. (See CDC recommendation of 1/29/21 for the return to in person schools).

### HOW TEACHERS ARE COPING

A mere perusal of articles in lay publications and the professional literature indicates that schools need to be more attentive to the social emotional needs of students during the pandemic. Families are experiencing economic, health and social crises, all of which have increased anxiety and vulnerability among students. One of the hallmarks of bullying is to target the most vulnerable (Olweus, 1993). In order to explore the daily concerns of teachers dealing with the specific issue of bullying, I focused on the problems/issues/concerns that they must grapple with on a daily basis. This enabled a convenient sample of teachers to share their experiences, collaborate with their peers and implement interventions with support.

Twenty-five participants were enrolled in a Student Teaching Seminar and a Research Seminar that are the capstone experiences in an M.S. Ed program in Childhood/Special Education. They were employed in a large urban school district, with a culturally and linguistically diverse population. All participants reviewed their schools' bullying/harassment policies and procedures, as well as their responsibilities for implementation.

Through the use of Zoom discussions and written products the following major issues emerged. They were:

- Difficulty identifying the signs of bullying victimization, especially with limited internet access for some students
- Difficulty in establishing relationships with students, both virtually and in person due to COVID 19 protocols
- Difficulty interacting with Mental Health staff
- Inability to collaborate with colleagues
- Difficulty implementing a consistent program due to absences, frequent schedule changes and switching back and forth from in person and virtual learning
- Difficulty in establishing relationships with students and overburdened families

### SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

Many of the participants felt the need to focus on the social-emotional connections with and among their students and to be vigilant dealing with bullying more so than academic skill acquisition. They addressed all three issues, but their concern for the basic needs of their students was paramount. In order to address their concerns they engaged in the following:

- They developed rituals and established routines
- They "checked in" with their students at least once per day
- They collaborated with their students' families to understand what they could do to help them deal with this difficult school year
- They alerted parents to services available to them through the school and/or other agencies
- They increased the on-going assessment of students' social emotional needs through self-regulation checklists, questionnaires, exit cards, and a Mood Meter to look for signs of bullying/harassment
- They modified their assignments so that students would have a platform to share their concerns
- They found ways to contact and interact with mental health professionals in their schools
- They researched the professional literature for evidenced based interventions in their classrooms during this difficult time and shared this information with their colleagues
- They searched for effective ways to provide support for parents and shared this with their colleagues
- They modelled empathy, kindness and caring to their students and colleagues
- They validated their colleagues' concerns

It is easy to become overwhelmed by all that must be done during this pandemic. School administrators need

to listen to those who deal with social and emotional issues among their students on a daily basis and provide an opportunity to share their concerns and collaborate to identify effective interventions. As previously noted, there is ample evidence regarding effective bullying prevention programs. What is lacking is how to do this in the current environment. The participants in this seminar found useful solutions to some of their concerns. However, this needs to be done in a more formalized manner if we are to address bullying/harassment in the 2021-2022 school year.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR

Based upon the input from the teachers in the seminar and a review of the professional literature the following recommendations were formulated.

- Evaluate your current bullying prevention program. A periodic review of your bullying prevention program is always advisable. However, at this point in time it is critical. The school environment has changed dramatically, both in the classroom and virtually. Students are more vulnerable now because of the many consequences of COVID 19. It should be no surprise that bullying would increase in such an environment. Victims are typically the most vulnerable students and bullies are able to readily identify them. Schools need to ensure that the bullying intervention program is district-wide and that all staff members receive training. The training should be on-going and help to identify new manifestations of bullying.
- Survey the students. Prior to implementing a bullying prevention program there must be an assessment of the current state of bullying in your school or district. There are innumerable surveys and questionnaires available online that should include information regarding the frequency and types of bullying experienced by students and places where bullying occurs and how victims attempt to get help.
- Infuse social-emotional skills into the curriculum. A common thread that emerged from the participants' discussion was the difficulty finding time to deal with social-emotional learning, including bullying. Forgan & Gonzales-DeHass (2004) provide specific ways in which teachers can infuse these skills into their curriculum. They provide ways to teach social skills and academic skills. Their recommendations are efficient and provide more time than is typically given to social-emotional learning while allowing for transfer of skills.
- Be aware of new manifestations of bullying. As previously noted, cyberbullying has increased during COVID 19. Teachers need to keep abreast of the current literature on cyberbullying (see Cyberbullying.US, the website for the Cyberbullying Research Center). More students are online and are uncomfortable with sharing their home

environment with their classmates. Students have been bullied about their lack of specific possessions, the clothing they are wearing or comments regarding the type and quality of their tech devices or lack thereof. Recently the Boston Public Schools mandated that students must appear on screen when they are learning virtually. Many criticized the action for the reasons cited above. Some students reported that they are being shunned by their peers and bullied when they find out they or their family members have the virus. The same can occur for in-person learning when other students target the student who they think had COVID 19.

The use of masks also has also made some students vulnerable. Clothing has always been a high frequency target of bullies and masks are merely a new item. Students may be bullied for wearing (or not wearing) masks, the types of masks they wear, the quality of the masks, etc. This is particularly true for students with disabilities who may find wearing masks intolerable due to sensory or medical issues. Students with disabilities are victimized at a much higher rate than other students and we need to ensure that the bullying prevention program is modified and adapted to their needs also (McNamara, 2013).

- Provide professional development. All participants noted that their schools had bullying prevention programs, but the pandemic made it difficult, if not impossible to implement as it is designed. Professional development should include ways to identify bullies and victims, how to make a referral, best practices for interventions and support for victims. Schools should create or add to a library of books on bullying that can be found online. (See [www.best-childrens-book.com/childrens-books-about-bullying](http://www.best-childrens-book.com/childrens-books-about-bullying).)

Additionally, in order to keep informed on best practices and research teachers and school leaders should consult [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov), the US Department of Education website. Finally, all paraprofessionals should be provided with professional development. Most bullying occurs in unstructured settings with many students and fewer adults. This is the environment where most paraprofessionals spend most of their day. (See [nea.org/neabullyfree/](http://nea.org/neabullyfree/) for excellent information for paraprofessionals.)

- Involve families and the community. Families must be provided with easily accessible information about bullying and harassment. Districts need to provide frequent meetings, either in person or virtual and develop a district or school wide committee that include families and community members with a family-friendly website. The website should provide information on referrals to the

appropriate school personnel if they feel their child is being bullied and useful books and websites that are geared towards families.

- Create an empathetic classroom. Bullying prevention programs must include ways to engage in acts of kindness and caring. As we approach more in person classes during the 2021-2022 school year, it is important to establish an empathetic classroom. In the rush to try to bridge the inevitable learning gap students experienced during school closing and virtual classes, vigilance on identifying bullying behaviors and victims and the emphasis on social emotional learning must continue to be emphasized. Creating an empathetic classroom will be even more important next year. Students can flourish in such a classroom when they are reinforced for their kind, caring and empathetic behaviors and respect for all is modelled and valued.

Some things that all teachers can do are:

- Write positive statements about every student in the class
- Keep a kindness journal (students should also do this)
- Display a "kind words" list in your classroom
- Model kind and caring behaviors
- Treat students with respect
- Use high rates of verbal and nonverbal praise
- Make a list of things that people who are kind do
- Do not use sarcasm
- Keep track of acts of kindness and caring in your class
- Reward acts of kindness and caring
- Teach specific social skills that support a sense of belonging for all students

## CONCLUSION

Dealing with bullying during COVID 19 is difficult. Acknowledging that fact will enable schools to develop and implement interventions that will address the new manifestations of bullying. All teachers involved in this seminar recognized the need to address social emotional needs during this difficult time. Clearly, anticipating and dealing with new manifestations of bullying is not equivalent to the life and death situations too many have encountered this year. However, know that many victims suffer from depression and in a number of instances they see no other option than to take their own lives. Helping teachers to recognize and seek help for troubled students is even more important during this pandemic crisis.

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Barry Edwards McNamara, Ed.D., is Associate Dean of Education and Professor of Education at Concordia College, Bronxville, NY.

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