BULLYING

Effective Strategies for Its Prevention by Richard T. Scarpaci

Put a halt to the name-calling, teasing, poking, and shoving, and make way for learning.

> Though bullying among school children is hardly a new phenomenon, highly publicized media accounts have brought the topic a great deal of attention recently. In approaching this problem, research has suggested that reduction of bullying is best accomplished through a comprehensive, school-wide effort that involves everyone—especially teachers (Limber 2003).

Some people view bullying as a normal aspect of childhood; teachers who prevent bullying know that this is not true. Bullying is a deliberate act that hurts young victims, both emotionally and physically. Aside from the victims, bullying affects people around them by distracting, intimidating, and upsetting them. Basically, bullying in the classroom is disruptive and prevents students from learning and teachers from reaching their students. Moreover, research has indicated that adopting programs which target antisocial behavior are likely to boost overall student academic performance (University of Washington 2005; Glew et al. 2005).

Specific teacher behaviors may limit or prevent bullying in schools. When teachers respect student autonomy, while maintaining young people's sense of belonging, and teach cause-and-effect thinking that promotes development of a sense of right and wrong, schools are likely to deter bullying (Davis 2005). To accomplish this goal, teachers must confront their own beliefs and misconceptions about bullying, learn skills for recognizing the indicators of bullying, and practice strategies for addressing and deterring bullying.

What Is **Bullying**?

Bullying can be defined as when a more powerful person hurts, frightens, or intimidates a weaker person on a continual and deliberate basis. This behavior manifests itself in three distinct forms (Ritter 2002): physical (hitting, shoving, poking, tripping, and slapping), verbal (name-calling, insults, derision, racist remarks, and teasing) and social (persuading others to exclude or reject someone). Bullying in schools can be described simply as when a

student is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students (Olweus 2003).

Regardless of definition, some basic concepts provide insight and characterize bullies and bullying.

- Bullying takes at least two people: bully and victim.
- Bullies like to feel strong and superior.
- Bullies enjoy having power over others.
- Bullies use their power to hurt other people.

Though violent incidents are relatively uncommon, harassment in various physical and verbal forms is widespread. The American Medical Association (AMA) claimed that half of all children in the United States are bullied at some point in their lives, and one in 10 is victimized on a regular basis (Ritter 2002). A National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2001) study found that 13 percent of children in grades six through ten had taunted, threatened, or acted physically aggressive toward classmates, while 11 percent had been the targets of such behavior. Six percent admitted that they both bullied others and had been bullied themselves. Boys were more likely to be bullies or victims of bullying than girls, who more frequently were the targets of bullying in the form of malicious rumors, electronic bullying, and sexual harassment.

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Myths about **Bullying**

The belief that bullying is some sort of childhood disease is false. Olweus (2003) disputed several common assumptions such as this one, finding that many so-called causes of bullying and profiles of typical victims do not stand up to empirical data. Students who wear glasses, are overweight, or speak differently are not more likely to become victims of bullies. Actually, those who are passive or submissive tend to become victims almost 85 percent of the time. Comprising the other 15 percent are aggressive victims who are targeted because of some provocative feature of their personalities.

Myths have been exposed online by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003), School Bully OnLine (Field 2005), and For KidSake (2006). Some typical myths about bullying are:

1. Bullying is just teasing. "I was just kidding around!" is a refrain educators often hear from bullies.
2. Some people deserve to be bullied.
3. Only boys are bullies.
4. People who complain about bullies are babies.
5. Bullying is a normal part of growing up.
6. Bullies will go away if you ignore them.
7. All bullies have low self-esteem. That's why they pick on others.
8. It's tattling to tell an adult when you're being bullied.
9. The best way to deal with a bully is by fighting or trying to get even.
10. People who are bullied might hurt for a while, but they'll get over it.

> "Teachers must learn to recognize the indicators of bullying, in both the victims and the bully."

Though a couple of these—such as numbers 6 and 10—may be true sometimes, all the other statements are false. The challenge, then, is to get past the myths and to identify the true indicators of bullying.

Indicators of **Bullying**

Awareness is the first step in preventing bullying. Teachers must learn to recognize the indicators of bullying, in both the victims and the bully.

Recognizing the Victims

Teachers should be alert to students who have poor social skills and few friends; they may be victims of bullying. Teachers also should keep an eye on students who are physically smaller and act or look unlike other students; they too are potential victims.

Frankel (1996) described the key indicators for a child at risk:

- A child's grades begin to fall.
- A child shows a decrease in interest for school in general.
- A child feigns illness, such as frequent headaches or stomachaches.
- A child who chooses ubiquitous routes home may be hiding the fact that he or she is a victim of a bully.
- A child claims to have lost books, money, or other belongings without a good explanation.
- A child is caught stealing or asking for extra money.
- A child has unexplained injuries, bruises, or torn clothing; bullying may be the cause for any or all of these indicators.

The AMA warned that bullying can damage a child as much as child abuse (Ritter 2002), and has asked doctors to be vigilant for signs that their young patients might be victims of bullying or be bullies themselves. The psychological trauma of recurring harassment puts victims at risk of suffering from depression or low self-esteem as an adult. The younger the child, the more he or she ultimately will suffer from bullying.

To identify whether a patient is being bullied, the AMA suggested that parents and doctors ask a series of questions (Ritter 2002). The questions also are quite appropriate for teachers who suspect that bullying is going on in their classrooms. Developing the skill of asking the right questions may help deter bullying.

1. Have you ever been teased at school? How long has this been going on?
2. Do you know of other children who have been teased?
3. Have you ever told your teacher about the teasing? What happens?
4. What kinds of things do children tease you about?
5. Do you have nicknames at school?
6. Have you ever been teased because of your illness, disability, or for looking different than other kids?
7. At recess, do you usually play with other children or by yourself?

Though one might not think of a student who attacks others as a victim, that is sometimes the case. Bullies are characterized by hypersensitivity toward criticism—being teased, harassed, or generally picked on by those to whom they were violent. Of the 37 school shootings since 1974, the National Threat Assessment Center found that attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, or had been previously attacked. Bullying is a prime factor in two-thirds of school shooting incidents (Viadero 2003). In more than half of the rampages, revenge was the motivation (Vossekuil et al. 2002).

Charles Andrew Williams, the 15-year-old Santee, California, student accused of killing two classmates and wounding 13 others (Reaves 2001) was tormented and bullied. Witnesses said that kids burned him with cigarette lighters and accused him of being a faggot. When he announced that he planned to pull a Columbine, two students called him a wimp and dared him to do it. Early intervention might have been able to prevent this tragedy.

Recognizing the Bully

Bullies may be more difficult to identify than the victims of bullying. While the stereotype is that bullies have low self-esteem, actually they're often self-confident, popular, and make friends easily (Cohen-Posey 1995). If slighted, however, they may take it out on someone who can't fight back. The reasons for this are based somewhere in familiar coping mechanisms that bullies have learned.

Bullies often manifest more violent behavior with age and tend to suffer from depression, suicidal behavior, and alcoholism (Olweus 1998). Many bullies come from homes where they're harassed themselves; they also tend to perform poorly at school; and, by age 24, 60 percent of former bullies have been convicted of a crime (Olweus 1998).

What Teachers **Can Do**

Teachers have dual roles: teach potential bullies social skills, while developing capacity to avoid intimidation. The next steps are to develop and implement the practices and strategies needed to stop bullying at school while assisting its victims.

Eliminating Harassment

Sexual harassment, when viewed as conflict, can be described as intentional or inadvertent conduct offensive to a reasonable person. A female victim of this type of harassment may appear angry, distrustful of her classmates, or self-conscious about her physical maturation as a result of untoward comments. A male may become passive following incidents of sexual insults, threats, or innuendo.

Teachers should investigate all complaints or rumors of sexual harassment. The best tool for the elimination of harassment is prevention. Affirmatively raise the subject in class. Express strong disapproval for untoward actions, develop sanctions (such as referrals to a higher authority), and inform students of their rights to raise the issue of harassment.

Encouraging Openness

To deter bullying, teachers should encourage and practice openness in class. Bullies tend to work in secret; they depend on the silence of their victims. If open communication is practiced, bullies will find it difficult to operate. Hold them accountable for their actions. Use or develop school antiharassment policies and hold bullies responsible for inappropriate behavior.

Practicing Bullying Prevention

Four basic principles for the prevention of bullying should be practiced by teachers (Olweus 2003):

1. Provide warm, positive interest and involvement from adults.
2. Provide consistent application of nonpunitive, nonphysical sanctions for unacceptable behavior or violations of rules.
3. Establish firm limits on unacceptable behavior.
4. Act as authorities and role models.

A bullying prevention program created by Olweus, Limber, and Mihalic (1999) incorporates having regular class meetings with students while establishing and enforcing class rules against bullying.

Neutralizing a Bully

Teachers should know how to neutralize a bully—to use the skill of acquiring information about incidents and then enforcing consequences if the negative behavior continues (Frankel 1996). Victims also should be taught how to deal with teasing so that they can help neutralize the bully. Teachers should practice being role models and encourage victims to make light of teasing by using statements such as:

- *So what?*
- *Can't you think of anything else to say?*
- *Tell me when you get to the funny part.*
- *And your point is?*

Responses such as these, perhaps surprisingly, generally do not incite bullies to further action.

The National Education Association has developed Quit It and Bullyproof—programs that work to neutralize bullies. These programs consist of interactive materials, including discussions and role-playing aimed at educating

children about hurtful behaviors, and advice on how to deal with bullying situations (Froschl, Sprung, and Mullin-Rindler 1998).

Resolving Conflict

Bullying creates conflicts for both the victim and the bully. Conflict should be viewed as normal, and an opportunity to develop constructive practices to prevent bullying. Most bullying prevention programs invite teachers to intervene when children's conflict is about power and control, not negotiation (Craig and Pepler 1997). That is, teacher intervention is appropriate and necessary to prevent or end a physical conflict between students; violence, once started, stops only when someone is hurt. Intervention by a teacher is less necessary when students are involved in a conflict whose outcome can be negotiated.

Briggs (1996) advocated extending social and emotional learning by viewing incidents of conflict as teachable moments for social learning, and practicing skill streaming (social skills training), peer mediation, or conflict resolution. Phillips (1997) described how her high school attempted to alleviate and resolve conflicts by establishing a "conflict wall" (see below) that provided step-by-step guidance. If students cannot resolve a conflict, have them agree to disagree; sometimes that is the best we can do.

Closing **Thoughts**

Specific teacher behaviors can limit or prevent bullying in school. Reject myths about bullying. Believe that effective teachers manage classrooms with care and understanding, while creating an open, warm, nurturing environment that allows less opportunity or incentive for bullying to occur (Scarpaci 2007). Demonstrate active positive interest in student well-being.

Develop the skill of questioning and respectful listening to assess indications of bullying. By learning and teaching conflict resolution skills, teachers create environments that are less conducive to bullying. Employ the skills necessary to address the psychological needs of students: belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser 1998). Focus on remediating student social-skill deficits by addressing classroom survival skills, friendship-making skills, dealing with feelings, and alternatives to aggression.

Teach students how to deal with behaviors that can be hurtful. Role-play in class to illustrate how to deal with teasing and threats of physical aggression. Bullying, when understood, can be prevented by doing what we do best—teaching! By combining education about bullying and establishing consequences for continued bullying, schools not only will neutralize bullying; they also might prevent it.

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Conflict Wall: Steps for Resolving Conflicts

1. Cool down. Don't try to resolve a conflict when you are angry. Take time out and attempt to resolve the conflict when cooler heads prevail.
2. Describe the conflict. Each person should be given the opportunity to explain what happened in his or her own words. (Make no judgments!)
3. Describe what caused the conflict. Be specific and insist on exact chronological order. (Don't place blame!)
4. Describe the feelings raised by the conflict.
5. Listen carefully and respectfully while the other person is talking.
6. Brainstorm solutions to the conflict.
7. Try your solutions.
8. If that doesn't work, try another solution.