
Best Practices for Preventing or Reducing Bullying in Schools

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Reducing violence in schools is a major concern of educators, parents, and legislators. Violence manifests itself in numerous ways, and there is growing evidence that low-level or underlying forms of violence have a profound effect on the learning environment of the school. Bullying is the most prevalent form of low-level violence in schools today and, if left unchecked, can lead to more serious forms of violence. Consequently, an essential aspect of school violence prevention is the identification and implementation of interventions and strategies designed to prevent or reduce bullying in schools. The authors discuss various forms of bullying in schools, prevalence rates, and the consequences of bullying for the bully, the victim, and the school community. Practical bullying prevention strategies that target multiple levels (that is, individual, classroom, and school) are provided, and best practices guidelines for implementing bullying prevention programs in schools are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *best practices; bullying; violence prevention*

Reducing violence in schools continues to be a major concern of educators, parents, and legislators. Although high-level forms of violence such as assault or murder receive most attention, researchers have begun to explore the impact of low-level or underlying forms of violence in schools and the profound ways in which low-level violence affects the learning environment (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002). Bullying is the most prevalent form of low-level violence in schools today. In the first nationally representative research study on the frequency of bullying in the United States (gathered in 1998 as part of the World Health Organization's Health Behavior in School-Aged Children Survey), it was reported that 30 percent of students in grades 6 through 10 reported bullying others, being the target of bullies, or both (Bowman, 2001). Research suggests that one of four children in the United States is bullied and one of five students define themselves as a bully (Lumsden, 2002).

There is growing evidence that bullying has a profound and pervasive effect on the learning environment of a school. Fear of being ridiculed, harassed, threatened, and ostracized at school inter-

feres with a student's ability to learn (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2002). If left unchecked, bullying can result in more dangerous and sometimes deadly forms of violence (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993). Eight states have considered or adopted legislation requiring schools to implement bullying prevention policies or programs (Zehr, 2001), with Massachusetts leading the way by allocating 1 million dollars to "bully-proof its schools" (Lumsden, 2002).

The recent passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (P.L. 107-100) ensures that school safety remain a top concern of school administrators across the United States for years to come. The Unsafe School Choice Option of NCLB requires that each state establish a definition of what constitutes a "persistently dangerous" school and that students who attend a school designated as persistently dangerous be allowed to transfer to a safe school in the same district (DOE, 2002). If school boards and school principals fail to address all forms of violence, including low-level violence, they risk being designated as persistently dangerous and losing federal funds and students. Safe schools address all forms of violence in their schools.

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School officials must demonstrate that they are spending public tax dollars wisely by implementing best practices in addressing bullying in their schools.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Hoover, Oliver, & Thomson, 1993; Olweus, 1991). In the past, bullying behaviors were sometimes described as teasing (Rigby, 1995) and dismissed as normal childhood behavior (Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). However, bullying is different from inevitable conflicts that occur during childhood and adolescence. Those who bully repeatedly engage in conflicts that they are sure to win because of their superior power, and those who bully are merciless in their tactics (Bitney & Title, 1997). Bullies use aggressive tactics repeatedly, with the intention of harming their victims (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1978; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999; Slee, 1995). Bullying can be either direct (for example, verbal and physical aggression) or indirect (for example, threats, insults, name calling, spreading rumors, writing hurtful graffiti, or encouraging others not to play with a particular child) (Olweus, 1978, 1991, 1993; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Roland, 1989). *Indirect bullying involves purposeful actions that lead to social exclusion or damage to a child's status or reputation in an attempt to get others to not socialize with the victim* (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The Nemours Foundation (n.d.) delineated two other types of bullying in schools—*racial bullying and sexual bullying*. Racial bullying consists of making racial slurs, writing graffiti, mocking the victim's culture, or making offensive gestures. Sexual bullying includes passing unwanted notes, jokes, pictures, taunts, or starting rumors of a sexual nature. Sexual bullying may also involve physically intrusive behaviors such as grabbing private parts or

forcing someone to engage in sexual behaviors (Committee for Children, 2003).

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

Bullying can have serious and long-term consequences for the bully, the victim, and the school community. Victims of bullying can have long-term emotional, academic, and behavioral problems (Borg, 1999; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993). *Children who are victims of bullying tend to have lower self-esteem and report feeling more depressed, lonely, anxious, and insecure than other children* (Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Duncan, 1999; Hodges & Perry, 1996; Olweus, 1978; Slee, 1995). Bullying contributes to a number of school-related problems, including a dislike of school, truancy, and school dropout (Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999; Sharp, 1995). It appears that many students stay away from public areas of the school (for example, cafeteria and restrooms) to avoid running into bullies (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1997). *The fear of being bullied is so great that an estimated 160,000 students stay home from school every day in the United States* (Vail, 1999).

Like victims, children who bully others are also at risk of social and emotional problems. Bullying among elementary-age children is an antecedent to more violent behavior in later grades (Craig & Pepler, 1999; Saufier & Gagne, 2000). *Bullies are likely to gravitate toward other aggressive children and be involved in gangs and delinquent activities* (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Garipey, 1988). *Children who bully others are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system*. One study found that 60 percent of boys identified as bullies between the sixth and ninth grades had at least one criminal conviction by age 24, and 40 percent of these individuals had more than three arrests. Conversely, only 10 percent of the boys who did not engage in bullying had criminal records (Olweus, 1991).

Even students who are not directly involved may be negatively affected by bullying. Students who observed bullying reported that witnessing bullying was unpleasant, and many reported being severely distressed by bullying (Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Zigler & Pepler, 1993). Witnesses of bullying are often intimidated and fearful that they may become the targets of bullies (Chandler, Nolin, & Davies,

1995). Witnesses of bullying may perform poorly in the classroom because their attention is focused on how they can avoid becoming the targets of bullying rather than on academic tasks (Chandler et al.). Bullying negatively affects the entire school, creating an environment of fear and intimidation (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). The Elton Report, which focused on discipline and teacher-pupil relations stated that “research suggests that bullying not only causes considerable suffering to individual pupils but also has a damaging effect on school atmosphere” (Department of Education and Science, 1989, pp. 102–103).

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Because bullying differs from other kinds of violence, it does not lend itself to the same interventions that may be effective in addressing other types of conflict among children (Limber & Nation, 1998). Conflict resolution, peer mediation strategies, and group therapy that focuses on increasing self-esteem have been shown to be relatively ineffective with bullies (Sampson, n.d.), because bullying behavior results from a power imbalance rather than deficits in social skills. For example, bullies plan and anticipate the reaction of their victim and proceed in a manner that does not result in adult detection; this type of manipulation requires highly developed social skills (Coivin, Tobin, Beard, Hadan, & Sprague, 1998; Limber & Nation). It also must be recognized that bullying behaviors are maintained by tangible reinforcers (for example, stolen lunch money) and social reinforcers (for example, entertaining peers) (Coivin et al.). It is important that these factors be taken into account in developing and implementing interventions with bullies.

Several decades of prevention research has greatly expanded the knowledge base of “what works” in school-based programs (Sloboda & David, 1997), including identification of essential elements in successful school-based prevention programs. The most successful school-based prevention programs do more than reach out to the individual child; they also seek to change the culture and climate of the school (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Garrity et al., 1997; Skiba & Fontanini, 2000). It appears that the most effective approaches for preventing or minimizing bullying in schools involve a comprehensive, multilevel strategy that targets bullies, victims, bystanders, families, and communities (Atlas & Pepler;

Garrity et al.; Larson, Smith, & Furlong, 2002; Skiba & Fontanini). Strategies to prevent or minimize bullying in schools must include school-level interventions designed to change the overall culture and climate of the school; classroom-level interventions targeting teachers and other adults in the school; and student-level interventions that target individual or small groups of victims and bullies.

In addition, programs should be carried out as they were designed. One of the most common mistakes made by schools is partial implementation of programs because of time constraints (Everhart & Wandersman, 2000). “Watered down” interventions usually resulted in incomplete, inadequate, or sporadic implementation (Gottfredson, 1987). Modifications usually dilute the effectiveness of the intervention, or in some cases the intervention results in no improvement at all (Dupper, 2003). Second, because bullying among elementary school-age children may be an antecedent to more violent behavior in later grades (Saufler, & Gagne, 2000), it is critical that prevention efforts begin in elementary school (DOE, 1998; Froschl & Sprung, 1999) and include multiple years of intervention using well-tested, standardized interventions with detailed lesson plans and student materials (Dupper). Programs are more likely to be successful if the entire school community is engaged, committed, and involved (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 2001). Administrators must express their support for the program, financial resources must be available, and the program should be integrated into the school curriculum.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

A number of hands-on practical strategies can be implemented by school social workers at each level of intervention (Table 1). School-level interventions should aim at clarifying and communicating behavioral norms—that is, developing classroom and schoolwide rules that prohibit bullying and promote adult modeling of respectful and nonviolent behavior. Intervention efforts are unlikely to be successful unless school staff recognize that bullying is a problem (Rigby, 1995). Teachers and other adults must understand that each adult in the school plays a role in ending bullying (Banks, 2000; Olweus et al., 1999). The principal should send strong messages to the entire school community that bullying is taken seriously and will not be tolerated

Table 1: Multilevel Approaches to Bullying Prevention**School-Level Components: Strategies for Changing the Culture and Climate of the School**

- A questionnaire is used to assess the nature and extent of bullying and raise awareness.
- The principal provides a leadership role in implementing the program.
- Administrators fully support the program and make a long-term commitment to change the school culture and climate.
- Anonymous reporting procedures are established.
- All areas of the school are well supervised.
- A school-based team that includes all stakeholders (parents, students, mental health personnel, teachers, and other school staff) is involved in the development, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation of the program.
- A discipline policy is developed and consistently enforced and provides a code of conduct with strict antibullying policies for staff, students, and volunteers.
- Ongoing training for all school staff (teachers, bus drivers, maintenance staff, administrators, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and so forth) and parents is provided to develop skills for creating and sustaining a safe school environment.
- An evaluation component is included.

Classroom-Level Components: Strategies Involving Teachers and Other Adults in the School

- Regular classroom meetings are held to discuss bullying.
- Students are involved in developing rules against bullying.
- The concept of bullying is integrated into curriculum.
- All school personnel model positive interpersonal skills and cooperative learning and do not set a bad example by exhibiting dominating or authoritarian behavior with students.
- Adults encourage the reporting of bullying incidents and consistently follow school bullying policies.
- Adults respond swiftly and consistently and are sympathetic to students who need support.
- Adults encourage students to include all students in play and activities.
- Adults send clear messages that bullying is not tolerated.
- Consistent enforcement of nonpunitive, graduated consequences for bullying behaviors are used.
- Corporal punishment is avoided.
- Parents are encouraged to contact the school if they suspect their child is involved in bullying.

Student-Level Components: Strategies Designed to Help Victims, Bullies, and Bystanders

- Victims are taught social skills (i.e., assertiveness skills) and problem-solving skills.
- A support system is established for students who are the targets of bullies.
- Students learn skills to intervene and provide assistance to victims, including mentoring programs for new students, peer mediation programs, supporting targeting students.
- Consequences for bullying behavior are immediate.
- Serious talks are held with parents and students involved in bullying.
- Pro-social behaviors are immediately reinforced.
- Mental health professionals assist students involved in bullying incidents.
- Bystanders are taught skills to intervene to help students who are being bullied.

Sources: Adapted from Blueprints for Violence Prevention. Retrieved May 5, 2005, from <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/index.html>; Coivin, G., Tobin, T., Beard, K., Hadan, S., & Sprague, J. (1998). The school bully: Assessing the problem, developing interventions, and future research direction. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 8*, 293-319; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). (2001). *Schoolwide prevention of bullying*. Retrieved May 25, 2003, from <http://www.nwrel.org/request/dec01/intro.html>; Parent Teacher Association of Connecticut, Inc. (2000). *Take action against bullying*. Retrieved May 5, 2005, from <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SVP-0056/>; and Rigby, K. (1995). What schools can do about bullying. *Professional Reading Guide for Educational Administrators, 17*(1), 1-5.

(NWREL, 2001). Moreover, school administrators must enlist the help of teachers, parents, and students in developing policies that address school bullying (Rigby, 1995). A written bullying prevention policy that is distributed to everyone in the school community can send a clear message that bullying incidents will be taken seriously and that action will be taken in response to them (Lumsden, 2002). The policy should include a clear definition

of bullying (with examples) and a reporting procedure (Rigby, 1995). A confidential reporting system may encourage students to report if they are victimized or have witnessed bullying (Parent Teacher Association of Connecticut, Inc., 2001). School officials should also encourage parents to report bullying if they suspect that their child is involved in bullying (DOE, 1998). The policy should describe how the school addresses incidents of

bullying. School policies that address bullying must not be limited to student bullying, but should include bullying of students by adults in the school (Rigby, 1995). It is important that teachers and other adults in the school model appropriate behavior.

Carrying out a needs assessment is essential in preventing bullying in schools. A needs assessment raises school staff awareness about the nature, prevalence, and consequences of bullying (Rigby, 1995). This process is essential because a number of studies have found that most school staff are not aware of the extent of the bullying problem (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1991; Smith, 1991; Zigler & Pepler, 1993) or dismiss bullying as part of normal childhood behavior (Bullock, 2002). For example, Boulton (1991, 1996) found that lunchtime supervisors often dismissed bullying as "rough-and-tumble play," and Atlas and Pepler (1998) found that lunchtime supervisors had difficulty differentiating playful and aggressive fighting. Moreover, teachers rarely intervene in bullying incidents that occur in the classroom (Skiba & Fontanini, 2000). A needs assessment should take into consideration the strengths, assets, and resources of a school and community. A number of assessment questionnaires are available for use with students. (See Rigby & Slee, 1993, and Rigby, 1997, for more detailed information.)

Following a needs assessment, other school-level interventions include a plan for implementing the new program, the formation of a coordinating committee, the formation of a plan to increase supervision in areas of the school where bullying is likely to occur (Olweus et al., 1999), and an in-service day for raising awareness of the bullying problem in the school and discussing characteristics of bullies and victims (NWREL, 2001).

Classroom-level interventions include encouraging teachers to integrate bullying prevention material into their curriculum (NWREL, 2001). This can be accomplished by holding regular classroom meetings to discuss bullying. These classroom meetings can help increase students' knowledge of how to intervene, build empathy, and encourage prosocial norms and behaviors (Olweus et al., 1999). Teachers can also involve the class in establishing and enforcing class rules against bullying. Teachers should also discuss the importance of bystanders in stopping bullying. Students should be taught that they have a responsibility to intervene if they observe someone being bullied at school. Bystanders need to be taught how their behaviors can either

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support or discourage bullies and that programs that teach bystanders to recognize and report bullying have the greatest impact on reducing bullying (Rigby, 1995). Bystanders can be taught how to intervene to help victims (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Salmivalli, 1999). For example, bystanders can be taught to stand up for the victims, include victims in group activities, and to report bullying to adults.

Student-level interventions are designed to develop social competence by changing students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors by using interactive teaching techniques (that is, role play and practice with peers). Victims of bullying can be helped to recognize attributes that place them at risk of becoming targets, to understand the consequences of their choices, and to modify their behaviors to minimize their chances of becoming victims (Vessey, Carlson, & Joyce, 2003). Children can be taught how to interpret social situations and can be helped not to cry or run away at every taunt, real or imagined (Vessey et al.). It is important that children understand that by staying calm in bullying situations, the bullying may subside, whereas responding aggressively or acting helpless may worsen the situation (Salmivalli, 1999). It is also important that victims know that discussing incidents with adults can be helpful and is welcomed by the important adults in their lives (Vessey et al.). A number of children's books about bullying have been published. (A list of age-appropriate books can be found at http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/pa/pa_blbully_pep.htm). Interventions at the individual level must include support and protection for the victims of bullying and discussions with the parents of bullies and victims (Olweus et al., 1999). Teachers or other school personnel should not suggest that victims of bullying brought it on themselves or chastise them for not being able to solve their own problems (Vessey et al.). School social workers should make every effort and encourage other school personnel to make similar efforts to protect children who are victims of bullying (Dupper, 2003). It is important that bullies receive clear messages from school personnel that bullying will not be tolerated and will end (Dupper).

As major stakeholders, parents should be involved throughout the entire process, including assessment, program development, program implementation, and evaluation (Fried & Fried, 1996). Strategies for involving parents include sharing the results of student surveys, offering information and training about bullying to parents, and including parents on bullying prevention committees. School social workers should encourage parents to report to the school if they suspect their child is involved in bullying or is the victim of bullying. Schools should also hold meetings with parents and students involved in bullying (NWREL, 2001). For additional information on what parents can do if their child is being bullied see Ross, 1996.

BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMS

The success of any bullying prevention effort depends on the selection of programs and strategies that fit the needs of a particular school (NWREL, 2001). In considering strategies and program components, several issues should be considered. First, the strategies or program should have empirical support (Comprehensive Health Education Foundation [CHEF], 1994). Second, bullying prevention strategies and programs must be "developmentally appropriate and be meaningful and enjoyable for the students" (CHEF, p. 31). Schools should select programs that are culturally sensitive, provide training, and are cost-efficient (CHEF).

Three multilevel prevention programs designed to prevent or minimize bullying in schools have been developed over the past decade: (1) Bully-Proofing Your School (Oakland Schools and the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office (2003); (2) The Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2001); and (3) Steps to Respect (Committee for Children, 2003). A brief description and contact information for each of these programs can be found in the Appendix.

CONCLUSION

Because bullying is one of the most pervasive forms of violence in U.S. schools (Batsche & Knoff, 1994), if school social workers are truly interested in reducing school violence they are "well-served to begin with this issue" (Larson et al., 2002, p. 1091). As more federal and state funds are directed at prevention programs rooted in scientific research, schools may turn increasingly to professionals who have the training and expertise to assume leader-

ship roles in bullying prevention efforts in schools. School social workers can assume several roles, including program developer, program promoter, and on-site coordinator of bullying prevention programs. They can play a pivotal role as members of a program's task force or coordinating committee. School social workers can also secure funding for implementation by collaborating with community agencies and universities and writing grants. Once funding and support are secured, a program implementation plan should be developed. School social workers can help identify steps necessary to carry out the program, identify the roles and responsibilities of participants, and prepare a timeline for implementation. School social workers also can help plan for the evaluation and maintenance of programs once they are in place. Over time, lack of funding, staff turnover, or loss of interest may cause programs to lose their momentum and fail. To ensure the long-term success of programs, school social workers can identify steps for long-range planning. Careful planning and evaluation can help students bring about systemic change contribute to our knowledge and understanding of what works in bullying prevention research (Dupper, 2003). **CS**

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BULLY-PROOFING YOUR SCHOOL

Bully-Proofing Your School is a multilevel program that aims to improve the climate of the school and provides students with skills to stand up to bullies. Bystanders are taught how to intervene to help victims. Free materials to help parents and educators develop bully-proofing efforts at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels are available for free download (that is, a letter to school administrators, bullying policy, facts about bullying, bullying behaviors chart, basic elements of schoolwide implementation, information about how to introduce the program to staff, parent tips to prevent bullying, a bully-proof resource list, student surveys, a parent organizational letter, sample letters, and a sample of a safe schools contract). In addition, scoring and analyzing results of the survey, workshops, and in-service trainings are available. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) identified Bully-Proofing Your School as a model program. Although no evaluation data are available on this program, the program is comprehensive and targets multiple levels of intervention. For more information about this program and links to documents and forms that may be downloaded log on to <http://www.oakland.k12.mi.us/resources/bullyproof.html>

BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAM

Bullying Prevention Program is a comprehensive, schoolwide program that targets students in elementary, middle, or junior high schools. Its goals are to reduce and prevent bullying problems among schoolchildren and to improve peer relations. The program is designed to be implemented at the school level, the class level, and the individual level. Schoolwide components include a questionnaire to assess the nature and prevalence of bullying at each school, a school conference day to discuss bullying, plan interventions, and form a coordinating committee. Classroom components include the establishment and enforcement of class rules against bullying and regular class meetings with students. Individual components include interventions with children identified as bullies and victims and discussions with parents of involved students. The program has been found to reduce bullying among children, improve the social climate of classrooms, and reduce antisocial behaviors. For more information about this program, contact the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado Web site at: <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools/bullying/overview.html>

STEPS TO RESPECT

Steps to Respect is a multidimensional program that targets interventions at the individual, classroom, and school levels. The student curriculum teaches children the “three Rs” of bullying (that is, recognizing, refusing, and reporting). The program helps children develop friendship skills and focuses on changing bystander behavior that supports bullying. The program teaches students and adults how to respond to bullying. According to information provided by the Committee for Children (n.d.), Steps to Respect is based on research demonstrating that teaching certain skills is an effective method of reducing bullying behavior. The entire school staff attends three-hour all-staff training. The training increases adult awareness of bullying at school and teaches adults how to respond effectively to children’s reports of bullying. Lessons that focus on building student’s skills in making and keeping friends, solving problems, managing emotions, and responding to bullying. For additional information about this program, contact Committee for Children, 2203 Airport Way South, Suite 500 Seattle, WA 98134-2027; Phone: 1 -800-634-4449; Web site: <http://www.cfchildren.org>.

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