

Bullying: Peer Abuse in Schools

By: U.S Department of Education (1998)

Every day in our Nation's schools, children are threatened, teased, taunted and tormented by schoolyard bullies. For some children, bullying is a fact of life that they are told to accept as a part of growing up. Those who fail to recognize and stop bullying practices as they occur actually promote violence, sending the message to children that might indeed makes right.

Bullying often leads to greater and prolonged violence. Not only does it harm its intended victims, but it also negatively affects the climate of schools and the opportunities for all students to learn and achieve in school.

What is bullying?

Bullying among children is commonly defined as intentional, repeated hurtful acts, words or other behavior, such as name-calling, threatening and/or shunning committed by one or more children against another. These negative acts are not intentionally provoked by the victims, and for such acts to be defined as bullying, an imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the bully and the victim.

Bullying may be physical, verbal, emotional or sexual in nature. For example:

- Physical bullying includes punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, beating, biting and excessive tickling.
- Verbal bullying includes such acts as hurtful name-calling, teasing and gossip.
- Emotional bullying includes rejecting, terrorizing, extorting, defaming, humiliating, blackmailing, rating/ranking of personal characteristics such as race, disability, ethnicity, or perceived sexual orientation, manipulating friendships, isolating, ostracizing and peer pressure.
- Sexual bullying includes many of the actions listed above as well as exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, sexual harassment and abuse involving actual physical contact and sexual assault.

Bullying among schoolchildren is quite common in the United States. In a study of junior high and high school students from small Midwestern towns, 88 percent of students reported having observed bullying, and 76.8 percent indicated that they had been a victim of bullying at school. Of the nearly 77 percent who had been victimized, 14 percent indicated that they experienced severe reactions to the abuse! (1)

A study of 6,500 fourth- to sixth-graders in the rural South indicated that during the three months preceding the survey, one in four students had been bullied with some regularity and that one in 10 had been bullied at least once a week. In the same survey, approximately one in five children admitted that they had bullied another child with some regularity during the three months preceding the survey. (2)

Bullying also occurs under names. Various forms of hazing - including "initiation rites" perpetrated against new students or new members on a sports team - are nothing more

than bullying (3). Same-gender and cross-gender sexual harassment in many cases also qualifies as bullying.

Who is hurt?

Bullying and harassment often interfere with learning. Acts of bullying usually occur away from the eyes of teachers or other responsible adults. Consequently, if perpetrators go unpunished, a climate of fear envelops the victims.

Victims can suffer far more than actual physical harm:

- Grades may suffer because attention is drawn away from learning.
- Fear may lead to absenteeism, truancy or dropping out.
- Victims may lose or fail to develop self-esteem, experience feelings of isolation and may become withdrawn and depressed.
- As students and later as adults, victims may be hesitant to take social, intellectual, emotional or vocational risks.
- If the problem persists, victims occasionally feel compelled to take drastic measures, such as vengeance in the form of fighting back, weapon-carrying or even suicide.
- Victims are more likely than nonvictims to grow up being socially anxious and insecure, displaying more symptoms of depression than those who were not victimized as children.

Bystanders and peers of victims can be distracted from learning as well. They may:

- be afraid to associate with the victim for fear of lowering their own status or of retribution from the bully and becoming victims themselves;
- fear reporting bullying incidents because they do not want to be called a "snitch," a "tattler" or an "informer";
- experience feelings of guilt or helplessness for not standing up to the bully on behalf of their classmate;
- be drawn into bullying behavior by group pressure;
- feel unsafe, unable to take action or a loss of control.

Bullies themselves are also at risk for long-term negative outcomes. In one study, elementary students who perpetrated acts of bullying attended school less frequently and were more likely to drop out of school than other students(4). Several studies suggest that bullying in early childhood may be an early sign of the development of violent tendencies, delinquency and criminality.(5)

A comprehensive approach

Bullying and the harm that it causes are seriously underestimated by many children and adults. Educators, parents and children concerned with violence prevention must also be concerned with the phenomenon of bullying and its link to other violent behaviors.

Research and experience suggest that comprehensive efforts that involve teachers and other school staff, students, parents and community members are likely to be more effective than purely classroom-based approaches. Identified by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence as one of 10 model violence prevention programs is that of Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus. The U.S. application of his comprehensive model program included the following core elements:

School-level Interventions

- Administration of a student questionnaire to determine the nature and extent of bullying problems at school.
- Formation of a bullying prevention coordinating committee (a small group of energetic teachers, administrators, counselors and other school staff, who plan and monitor the school's activities).
- Teacher in-service days to review findings from the questionnaire, discuss problems of bullying, and plan the school's violence prevention efforts.
- Schoolwide events to launch the program (e.g., via school television or assemblies).
- Increased supervision in areas that are hot spots for bullying and violence at the school.
- Development of schoolwide rules and sanctions against bullying.
- Development of a system to reinforce prosocial behavior (e.g., "Caught you Caring" initiatives).
- Parent involvement in school activities (e.g., highlighting the program at PTA meetings, school open houses, and special violence prevention programs; encouraging parents' participation in planning activities and school events).

Classroom activities

- Regularly scheduled classroom meetings during which students and teachers engage in discussion, role-playing and artistic activities related to preventing bullying and other forms of violence among students.

Individual interventions

- Immediate intervention by school staff in all bullying incidents.
- Involvement of parents of bullies and victims of bullying, where appropriate.
- Formation of "friendship groups" or other supports for students who are victims of bullying.
- Involvement of school counselors or mental health professionals, where appropriate.

Community activities

- Efforts to make the program known among a wide range of residents in the local community (e.g., convening meetings with leaders of the community to discuss the school's program and problems associated with bullying, encouraging local

media coverage of the school's efforts, engaging student in efforts to discuss their school's program with informal leaders of the community).

- Involvement of community members in the school's anti-bullying activities (e.g., soliciting assistance from local business to support aspects of the program, involving community members in school districtwide "Bully-Free Day" events).
- Engaging community members, students, and school personnel in anti-bullying efforts within the community (e.g., introducing core program elements into summer church school classes).

Clearly, there is no "silver bullet" for preventing bullying or other forms of violence at school. A comprehensive approach, such as this one, shows the most promise in helping to create a safe school environment that will help children to grow academically and socially. Before implementing any efforts to address bullying or other violence at school, school administrators should keep in mind that:

- Ideally, efforts should begin early - as children transition into kindergarten - and continue throughout a child's formal education;
- Effective programs require strong leadership and on going commitment on the part of school personnel;
- Ongoing staff development and training are important to sustain programs;
- Programs should be culturally sensitive to student diversity issues and developmentally appropriate; and
- Parental and community involvement in the planning and execution of such programs is critical.

Following are suggested action steps, strategies and resources that school administrators, educators, students and parents can employ in an effort to stop bullying in schools.

Action steps for school administrators

- Assess the awareness and the scope of the bullying problem at your school through student and staff surveys.
- Closely supervise children on the playgrounds and in classrooms, hallways, rest rooms, cafeterias and other areas where bullying occurs in your school.
- Conduct schoolwide assemblies and teacher/staff in-service training to raise awareness regarding the problem of bullying and to communicate a zero tolerance for such behavior.
- Post and publicize clear behavior standards, including rules against bullying, for all students. Consistently and fairly enforce such standards.
- Encourage parent participation by establishing on-campus parents' centers that recruit, coordinate and encourage parents to take part in the educational process and in volunteering to assist in school activities and projects.
- Establish a confidential reporting system that allows children to report victimization and that records the details of bullying incidents.
- Ensure that your school has all legally required policies and grievance procedures for sexual discrimination. Make these procedures known to parents and students.

- Receive and listen receptively to parents who report bullying. Establish procedures whereby such reports are investigated and resolved expeditiously at the school level in order to avoid perpetuating bullying.
- Develop strategies to reward students for positive, inclusive behavior.
- Provide schoolwide and classroom activities that are designed to build self-esteem by spotlighting special talents, hobbies, interests and abilities of all students and that foster mutual understanding of and appreciation for differences in others.

Strategies for classroom teachers

- Provide students with opportunities to talk about bullying and enlist their support in defining bullying as unacceptable behavior.
- Involve students in establishing classroom rules against bullying. Such rules may include a commitment from the teacher to not "look the other way" when incidents involving bullying occur.
- Provide classroom activities and discussions related to bullying and violence, including the harm that they cause and strategies to reduce them.
- Develop a classroom action plan to ensure that students know what to do when they observe a bully/ victim confrontation.
- Teach cooperation by assigning projects that require collaboration. Such cooperation teaches students how to compromise and how to assert without demanding. Take care to vary grouping of participants and to monitor the treatment of participants in each group.
- Take immediate action when bullying is observed. All teachers and school staff must let children know that they care and will not allow anyone to be mistreated. By taking immediate action and dealing directly with the bully, adults support both the victim and the witnesses.
- Confront bullies in private. Challenging a bully in front of his/her peers may actually enhance his/her status and lead to further aggression.
- Notify the parents of both victims and bullies when a confrontation occurs, and seek to resolve the problem expeditiously at school.
- Refer both victims and aggressors to counseling whenever appropriate.
- Provide protection for bullying victims, whenever necessary. Such protection may include creating a buddy system whereby students have a particular friend or older buddy on whom they can depend and with whom they share class schedule information and plans for the school day.
- Listen receptively to parents who report bullying and investigate reported circumstances so that immediate and appropriate school action may be taken.
- Avoid attempts to mediate a bullying situation. The difference in power between victims and bullies may cause victims to feel further victimized by the process or believe that they are somehow at fault.

Strategies for students

Students may not know what to do when they observe a classmate being bullied or experience such victimization themselves. Classroom discussions and activities may help

students develop a variety of appropriate actions that they can take when they witness or experience such victimization. For instance, depending on the situation and their own level of comfort, students can:

- seek immediate help from an adult;
- report bullying/victimization incidents to school personnel;
- speak up and/or offer support to the victim when they see him/her being bullied- for example, picking up the victim's books and handing them to him or her;
- privately support those being hurt with words of kindness or condolence;
- express disapproval of bullying behavior by not joining in the laughter, teasing or spreading of rumors or gossip; and
- attempt to defuse problem situations either single handedly or in a group - for example, by taking the bully aside and asking him/her to "cool it."

Strategies for parents

The best protection parents can offer their children who are involved in a bully/victim conflict is to foster their child's confidence and independence and to be willing to take action when needed. The following suggestions are offered to help parents identify appropriate responses to conflict experienced by their children at school:

- Be careful not to convey to a child who is being victimized that something is wrong with him/her or that he/she deserves such treatment. When a child is subjected to abuse from his or her peers, it is not fair to fault the child's social skills. Respect is a basic right: All children are entitled to courteous and respectful treatment. Convince your child that he or she is not at fault and that the bully's behavior is the source of the problem.
- It is appropriate to call the school if your child is involved in a conflict as either a victim or a bully. Work collaboratively with school personnel to address the problem. Keep records of incidents so that you can be specific in your discussion with school personnel about your child's experiences at school.
- You may wish to arrange a conference with a teacher, principal or counselor. School personnel may be able to offer some practical advice to help you and your child. They may also be able to intervene directly with each of the participants. School personnel may have observed the conflict firsthand and may be able to corroborate your child's version of the incident, making it harder for the bully or the bully's parents to deny its authenticity.
- While it is often important to talk with the bully or his/ her parents, be careful in your approach. Speaking directly to the bully may signal to the bully that your child is a weakling. Speaking with the parents of a bully may not accomplish anything since lack of parental involvement in the child's life is a typical characteristic of parents of bullies. Parents of bullies may also fail to see anything wrong with bullying, equating it to "standing up for oneself."
- Offer support to your child but do not encourage dependence on you. Rescuing your child from challenges or assuming responsibility yourself when things are not going well does not teach your child independence. The more choices a child

- has to make, the more he or she develops independence, and independence can contribute to self-confidence.
- Do not encourage your child to be aggressive or to strike back. Chances are that it is not his or her nature to do so. Rather, teach your child to be assertive. A bully often is looking for an indication that his/her threats and intimidation are working. Tears or passive acceptance only reinforces the bully's behavior. A child who does not respond as the bully desires is not likely to be chosen as a victim. For example, children can be taught to respond to aggression with humor and assertions rather than acquiescence.
 - Be patient. Conflict between children more than likely will not be resolved overnight. Be prepared to spend time with your child, encouraging your child to develop new interests or strengthen existing talents and skills that will help develop and improve his/her self-esteem. Also help your child to develop new or bolster existing friendships. Friends often serve as buffers to bullying.
 - If the problem persists or escalates, you may need to seek an attorney's help or contact local law enforcement officials. Bullying or acts of bullying should not be tolerated in the school or the community. Students should not have to tolerate bullying at school any more than adults would tolerate such situations at work.

Classroom resources

Both bullies and their victims need help in learning new ways to get along in school. Children need to learn about gaining, using and abusing power and about the differences between negotiating and demanding. They must also learn to consider the needs, behaviors and feelings of others. Curriculum developers and publishers now offer a variety of prevention/intervention materials to eliminate bullying and other forms of personal conflict from school life. Curricula such as those listed below are examples of tools that may be used as part of a comprehensive approach to bullying:

- **No Bullying.** This Johnson Institute curriculum, first implemented during the 1996-97 school year in schools across the country, describes the tell-or-tattle dilemma facing many victims of bullying. Teachers are given step-by-step guidelines on how to teach students the difference between telling and tattling. Teachers are also shown how to establish and use immediate consequences when dealing with bullies.
- **Bullyproof: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Fourth and Fifth Grade Students.** This guide by Lisa Sjostrom and Nan Stein contains 11 sequential lessons designed to help children understand the difference between teasing and bullying and to gain awareness about bullying and harassment through class discussions, role-play and writing, reading and art exercises.
- **Bully-Proofing Your School.** This program, available from Sopris West, uses a comprehensive approach. Key elements include conflict resolution training for all staff members, social skills building for victims, positive leadership skills training for bullies, intervention techniques for those who neither bully nor are bullied and the development of parental support.

- **Quit It! A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying.** This guide by Merle Frosche, Barbara Sprung, and Nancy Mullin- Rindler with Nan Stein contains 10 lesson plans. Each lesson is divided into activities geared to the developmental needs of students in kindergarten through third grade. Class discussions, role plays, creative drawing and writing activities, physical games and exercises and connections to children's literature give children a vocabulary and a conceptual framework that allows them to understand the distinction between teasing and bullying.
- **Second Step.** The Committee for Children's Second Step curriculum teaches positive social skills to children and families, including skill building in empathy, impulse control, problem solving and anger management. Initial evaluations of Second Step indicate that second and third grade students engaged in more prosocial behavior and decreased physically aggressive behavior after participating in the program.(6)
- **"Bullying."** This video and accompanying teacher's guide (produced by South Carolina's Educational Television in collaboration with the Institute for Families In Society at the University of South Carolina) contains five lesson plans that incorporate classroom discussions, roleplaying and artistic exercises. It is appropriate for older elementary and middle-school students.

In the effort to make schools and communities safer, educators, parents and concerned citizens are encouraged to support schoolwide programs that address bullying. As part of this schoolwide effort, adults - including bus drivers, playground supervisors, hall monitors, security officers, cafeteria workers, maintenance personnel, clerical staff, teachers, parent volunteers, counselors and administrators - must present a united front that communicates to all students that bullying will not be tolerated at school.

Innovative approaches to bully prevention

School-based bullying prevention programs across the United States vary a great deal in their target populations, their comprehensiveness and the specific approaches they take. When considering use of a given curriculum or program to eliminate bullying, request from the publisher evaluation data and names of persons to contact for information about the effectiveness of the program, its procedures and materials. Below are descriptions of anti-bullying programs being used in schools and communities around the country. These programs employ some or all of the elements of a comprehensive bully prevention strategy described above.

Charleston, South Carolina

In collaboration with the Medical University of South Carolina, staff at Alice Birney Middle School will launch a unique violence prevention initiative in the fall of 1998 that combines two model programs targeted at aggressive behavior: a comprehensive bullying prevention effort and multisystemic therapy for children with serious behavior problems. Following the model bullying prevention program developed by Olweus, the entire school will participate in violence prevention activities to reduce bullying among the school's sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. Activities include the development of rules

against bullying, increased supervision of students' behavior, role playing, discussions and other classroom activities and the active involvement of parents and community members. In addition, students who exhibit particularly aggressive behavior will be invited to participate in multisystemic therapy (MST), an intensive family and home-based treatment that attempts to change how youth function in their natural settings - home, school and neighborhood. MST therapists will have small caseloads (four to six families) and will provide services in the family's home or at school. A therapist will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Says project director Phillippe Cunningham, "Individually, these two models have shown success in reducing aggressive behavior among kids by targeting the many causes of aggressive behavior in the child's natural environment. We are anxious to see how effective this combined approach can be." An evaluation of this project will continue over the next two years.

Austin, Texas

In the fall of 1998, students and staff at six elementary schools in Austin, Texas, are preparing to implement and evaluate a comprehensive violence prevention program called "Expect Respect." This program is a collaborative effort among SafePlace (a domestic violence and sexual assault center), the Austin Independent School District, and the University of Texas at Austin, and is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Expect Respect" will focus on the reduction of bullying and the promotion of respectful relationships among students as a means of preventing dating and domestic violence.

The program includes classroom activities that are co-facilitated by SafePlace staff and teachers, and staff and parent seminars to increase awareness of prevention strategies for bullying and sexual harassment and to increase understanding of the effects of domestic violence on children. Individual support services for students experiencing difficulties in peer or family relationships will be provided on campus. In addition, existing Campus Advisory Councils (consisting of administrators, parents, teachers and students) will review and develop campus wide policies and procedures to reduce bullying and sexual harassment. According to Barri Rosenbluth, director of School-based Services at SafePlace, "Bullying is at the heart of domestic violence. The goal of this project is to reduce the social acceptance of bullying and sexual harassment in schools and to help children increase their skills and expectations for healthy relationships."

Englewood, Colorado

Willow Creek Elementary School in suburban Englewood, Colorado, employed the "Bully-Proofing Your School" (Sopris West) Program beginning in the fall of 1995. The program began increasing the knowledge of staff and students, clearing misconceptions regarding bullying and emphasizing the importance of a consistent schoolwide intervention. Staff were taught different methods for dealing with bullies and victims. Students were taught protective skills that gave them a sense of empowerment in dealing with bullying situations. The students were also encouraged to form a caring community in which everyone looks out for and sticks up for everyone else. During the first year, students in grades one through five participated in nine weekly group meetings. Children also participated in optional sessions dealing with conflict resolution and diversity. Follow-up review sessions were conducted one to two months later. Kindergarten

students were introduced to an abbreviated version of the program. During the second year, first-grade students were provided with the entire program, and students in grades two through five participated in a three-session review of the program.

A series of student and parent surveys were conducted over the two-year program. Based on these reports, the bully-proofing program appears to be impacting the school environment in a positive way. Central to the success of the program is the caring majority concept whereby 80 percent of children who are neither bullies nor victims set the climate for the school by working together to stop bullying. According to William Porter, associate director for Student Achievement Services for the Cherry Creek School District, "Perceptions of safety increased before the actual incidence of bullying declined. We believe that the mere act of informing students about bullying, letting them know that the Willow Creek staff were working together, and giving them strategies for handling bullying increased their sense of safety even before behaviors began to change."

Caruthersville, Missouri

Principal J.J. Ballington believes that Respect & Protect, a violence prevention and intervention program developed by the Johnson Institute of Minneapolis, has made a significant difference in the atmosphere at Caruthersville Middle School in Caruthersville, Missouri. Implemented in September 1996, the program emphasizes a comprehensive approach to violence prevention, encouraging all school personnel to commit to a violence prevention plan and to consistently enforce appropriate measures to intervene when violent acts occur. School staff have learned to recognize and control actions that enable violence - actions such as denying, rationalizing, justifying, avoiding or blaming. They have also learned that appropriate consequences coupled with prevention and intervention programs will change negative behaviors and ultimately the school environment. Students are reminded daily that no form of violence - including hurtful words, looks, signs or acts that cause harm to a person's body, feelings or possessions - will be tolerated. Students who engage in physical violence, bullying or intimidation are required to attend after-school violence intervention counseling that focuses on anger management and conflict resolution. Failure to attend results in suspension. Prevention programs that have been implemented at Caruthersville Middle School as part of its comprehensive approach include the Fight-Free School program, Violence is Preventable exploratory course, the No Bullying program, and Resolve All Problems Peacefully (R.A.P.P.) peer mediation program.

Principal Bullington is conducting an evaluation of the Respect and Protect program at Caruthersville Middle School. Initial results indicate a 16 percent reduction in the first year and a 25 percent reduction in the second year in the number of students involved in physical confrontations. He reports, "Students as well as teachers feel empowered to help stop the violence. Students are realizing they are responsible for their own behavior and if they choose to engage in unacceptable behavior, appropriate consequences will apply."

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[Endnotes](#)

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