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The Menacing Nature of Bullying: What We Know and What We Can Do

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What We Know and What We Can Do

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Do we just know more about bullying today or has it become worse? This is a familiar inquiry made about a myriad of social issues, and is also a typical question posed by audiences receiving anti-bully training, and the answer is...well, both.

We know more about bullying because it has evolved from “a rite of passage” to the most common form of violence in our society. Dan Olweus, Norwegian professor, researcher, and the author of Bullying at School, began the first systematic study of bullying in the 1970s. It would be the late 1980s and early 1990s before research and public attention emerged in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and the Netherlands.

In 1982, the suicides of three adolescent boys which were attributed to bullying led to a nationwide campaign in Norway and quickly spread to other Scandinavian countries. Olweus’ research and programming, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, centered on the characteristics of the bully and victim. He also studied the effects of gender, class size, and school size, in addition to warning signs of victimization and successful interventions.

Stan Davis, school counselor, researcher, and author of Schools Where Everyone Belongs and Empowering the Bystander, built upon the work of Olweus with the important identification of the role of the bystander. At Davis’ rural school in Maine, a rubric-based disciplinary system formed the foundation for his anti-bullying efforts. Other features included clear and uniform school-wide behavior expectations, positive interaction of the staff with students, opportunities for aggressive youngsters to learn from their behavior, experiences in problem solving and conflict resolution, and bystander training and empowerment. Davis believed that if the adults at school modeled respectful behavior and held bullies responsible for their actions, then they could help bullies develop empathy, support the victim in meaningful ways, and empower the bystanders to take a stand against bullies.

In 1996 psychologist Charlotte Ross defined bullying as a form of social interaction, not necessarily long-standing, in which a more aggressive behavior that is intended to cause distress affects a less dominant individual. This aggressive behavior may take the form of physical, verbal, or indirect attacks. More than one bully and one victim may participate in the interaction.

Research shows that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, where the children are taught to solve conflicts with violence and parental involvement and affection are absent. Parents may model aggressive behavior by yelling at their children, hitting them and demeaning them at home and in public.

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The Triad: Bully, Target, Bystander

Children who bully hit, kick, tease, name-call, threaten, and gossip about the target. They encourage others to exclude the target from their friendship, and warn them not to “snitch” about their actions. The bully’s desire for power is stronger than their feeling of empathy, so the bully is willing to hurt others in order to feel powerful. Bullies deny their behavior, blame the target, or make light of the intent of the bullying, “I was just kidding”.

Bullies choose targets who have little social support. Bystanders watch in silence or nervously laugh. The bully may take this as a sign of approval. There is no research to support the notion that bullies express their low self-esteem through aggression. Bullies generally have good self-esteem and are confident and comfortable with their actions. Children are more likely to bully if adults and peers observe their behavior and do not stop it.

The target, bystander, and even the offender each suffer from the menacing nature of bullying. The target experiences anxiety, depression, loneliness, and unhappiness. Rates of absenteeism are higher among the victimized students than are rates among their nonbullied peers, as are dropout rates. The bully does not fare much better.

Approximately 60% of boys who were characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one conviction by the age of 24. As young adults, former bullies had a fourfold increase in the level of relatively serious, recidivist criminality, as documented in official crime records. The former bullies were more likely to be convicted of serious crimes and were inclined to be abusive to their wives and children. About 85% of students are bystanders. Bystanders may feel anxious and afraid of becoming a victim. The inaction of a bystander can bring about the same powerlessness that is felt by the target.

The world of technology has given individuals new means to bully. In this way, bullying has become worse. In addition to physical, verbal, and relational bullying, chat rooms, emails, and text messages have expanded the venues. Cyberbullying gives the bully a feeling of invisibility, not only from being detected, but also from feeling the face-to-face impact of his/her actions. The absence of feedback weakens the emotions of remorse and empathy. Cyberbullying can also transpire by proxy because of the large networks of communication that can be created with online strangers. Targets might be harassed by people they do not even know from all over the world. It becomes frightening for a target to even check phone or email messages. Bullying is abusive becomes it deteriorates the target’s sense of safety, belonging, self-esteem and control over one’s life.

The Anti-Bully Movement

Other forms of abuse such as sexual harassment and domestic violence have been approached and treated by our society in similar ways. First, there was denial that the behavior existed, or that it was damaging or deliberate. The prevailing attitudes of the times frequently excused the offenders. Secondly, the targets were blamed for aggravating the offender. A victim of sexual harassment was accused of dressing provocatively; a battered wife was advised to become a better cook or housekeeper. The third stage in the sequence of responses held the offender responsible rather than the victim, but did so in a passive manner. Public awareness campaigns alerted the abusers to the negative effects their behavior had on the...
victims, but of course, the abusers already knew this. Lastly, society established strategies leading to more effective outcomes. This is not to say the problems of sexual harassment and domestic violence have been eliminated, but we have moved from considering them normal and blaming the victim to holding the abuser accountable.

Bullying is evolving along the same path. The parallels to other forms of abuse can help us to choose interventions which are characterized by the following: (1) the behavior is clearly defined, (2) the rules and laws are enforced, (3) positive behavior is modeled, and (4) the widespread acceptance of the problem is changed.

**Workable Solutions**

So what can we do? How do we “join the movement” against the abuse of bullying? For starters, we can contact our legislators. Michigan is one of only five states that does not have an anti-bullying law (Introduced: Matt’s Safe School Law, House Bill 4162). Make it clear to the lawmakers that the victimization of a child at the hands of a bully is intolerable and we want it to stop. Next, our schools must implement research based strategies and programming in response to a nationwide epidemic of bullying. The outcomes include school shootings, most of which can be traced to extensive and severe bullying, and “bullycide,” the taking of one’s life as a way to end bullying. These tragic events demand a plan of action.

Armed with the research and years of experience as a teacher and administrator, I developed an anti-bully curriculum for elementary and middle schools. The basic premise was that a whole school campaign would define bullying as an intentional act that could be controlled by the dedication of all the school’s stakeholders. The objective was to create a low-cost and usable program that would result in fewer disciplinary referrals and improved school climate.

The intervention strategies and the instructional program included the following components:

1. A Restructured Disciplinary System: a code of conduct operating smoothly with a clearly stated set of rules that are effectively communicated to the students and their families
2. Increased Supervision: more adults equals less bullying
3. Classroom Meetings: students learn conflict-resolution skills and use those skills every day, not only to solve crises but to prevent problems together
4. Monday Morning Meetings: the foundation for the anti-bullying curriculum which unified the school with common language, common goals, and a theme of community building; had three components which included instruction, celebrations, and goal setting
5. The Morning Greeting: a daily salutation and a friendly touch by classroom teachers for each of their students
6. Student Reporting System: a method for students to report incidences and express themselves in a nonthreatening way
7. Silent Mentors: assigned to students who were challenged academically, socially, or emotionally, ensuring that a minimum of two adults supported the most difficult or needy students
8. Good News Postcards: mailed home every month by teachers with affirming messages, recognized effort, or hopeful comments
9. Focus Groups: weekly meetings of small groups of students who would be empowered by the conversations, and serious about finding solutions to common problems at school

This curriculum was multifaceted and students, staff, and community each played a role that contributed to the success of the program. The shared vocabulary and definitions and raised awareness of the problem became factors in managing the problem. The nine elements that encompassed the array revealed a global plan that attacked the crisis of bullying among school children from every angle. The program afforded clear expectations, appropriate consequences, positive affirmation, parental involvement, relationship building between teachers and students, and student input and feedback. The anecdotal records as well as the data review of behavior reports and suspensions pointed to a significant decline in bullying incidences, with the implication of improved school climate.

The research has characterized the harmful effects of bullying among school children. The powerful residuals for the bully, target, and bystander should provide the impetus for educators, parents, school boards, and communities to take action.

**Dr. Michele Coyne’s** dissertation examined the nature and extent of bullying among students in an urban school and used action research to provide strategies for the reduction and prevention of bullying. Dr. Coyne was a teacher for 25 years and a building principal for 10 years. Her anti-bully program provided the foundation for positive school climate, relationship building, and increased academic achievement. Visit Michele at her website: bullyfreestudents.com.

**References:**


