

Student peer bullying

A brief overview of the problem and some associated myths

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Over the past few years the news media has increasingly highlighted the problem of peer bullying in schools. Within school communities there is a considerable divergence of opinion as to how it should be viewed and what should be done to address it. Research in the area of bullying began to flourish following the pioneering work of Dan Olweus in the early 1970s and has sufficient depth to provide considerable direction to schools. In the last 20 years, a number of researchers in New Zealand and Australia have contributed substantially to the growing body of knowledge. This article takes a brief overview of the problem and examines a number of the associated myths about bullying, in the light of recent research.

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Identifying the problem

Various media have recently highlighted a report from the “*Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*” which included data on bullying collected from 36 countries (Jensen & Browne, 2008). It was concerning to note that Australia and New Zealand were placed in the top five countries with the worst reported incidence of school bullying. While any survey on bullying can be subjective by nature, these results are in line with numerous other studies from both countries which highlight the widespread problem that exists throughout our school system. Studies in Australia (Rigby, 2007; 35) have shown that around 50% of children experience bullying in some form. New Zealand research involving 2,066 secondary students (Adair et al., 2000), reported that 75% of students had been bullied, and 44% admitted bullying others, at some time during their schooling. It must be noted that these figures include children who may have been bullied infrequently or for only a limited time, and a number who report the personal effects of the bullying as minimal. Of particular concern is the small percentage of children who are bullied regularly and often—over long periods of time. From extensive work with Australian schools, Rigby (2007; 35) concludes that about 1 in 5 children are victimised by peers on a regular basis.

Of equal concern is the common reaction in response to the reported survey, *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*. New South Wales Education Minister, Verity Frith, was reported as saying that she had strengthened principals’ powers to deal with bullying, “increasing suspension periods to 20 days” (Jensen & Browne, 2008). She goes on to say that, “New South Wales schools are safe places and bullying and stealing are not tolerated”. Such statements arguably indicate a gap in understanding both the extent of the problem and the steps needed to address it. The claim that many schools make in having a ‘zero tolerance’ towards bullying usually does little in itself to minimise it. The increase in public awareness doesn’t appear to coincide with an equal growth in understanding.

This misunderstanding over the seriousness of school bullying is also evident within the schools themselves. Oliver et al. (2001) surveyed middle and high school students in a number of small-town Midwestern schools in the United States. Many who admitted to bullying behaviour justified their actions by saying they believed the victims brought it upon themselves. They considered what they were doing was mostly in fun, and some even felt that bullying was helpful by making kids tougher.

A survey of principals by Flynt and Morton (2008) revealed that 88% believed bullying was a minor problem in their school. There is often a significant gap between the perception of staff and that of students. A major study by Bradshaw et al. (2007) involved collecting information from students and staff in 75 elementary schools, 20 middle schools, and 14 high schools. The total sample was 15,185 students (grades 4–8) and 1,547 staff members. Over 49% of children reported being bullied and 30.9% reported bullying at least once during the past month. Just over 40% of bullies and 23% of victims described their experiences as frequent. In contrast to these figures, 70% of staff estimated the amount of bullying to be 15% or less. It was also of interest that over 86% of staff believed they had effective strategies for handling bullying situations, whereas most students reported that staff intervention

usually made things worse. The vast majority of staff believed their intervention efforts were making the necessary difference, while most students felt their school was not doing enough. Additional data considered significant was that 13% of staff believed bullying was just a part of life that everyone has to go through, 53% reported having been bullied as a child and 22% reported having been bullied as an adult while working at the school.

This gap in perception is highlighted by Simons (2002, 25) in her research into “girl aggression”. In interviewing large numbers of students, it became evident that many victims were being quietly isolated without the teacher being aware.

If girls are whispering, the teacher thinks it's going to be all right because they're not hitting people. If they punch, they get sent to the office. Teachers think they're not hurting you...but they are.

Simons proceeds to offer this perceptive analogy:

At once I was reminded of scary movies in which only children can see the ghost. The adults pass through the same rooms and live the same moments, yet they are unable to see a whole world of action around them. So, too, in classrooms... victims are desperately alone even though a teacher is just steps away.

Dealing with bullying in schools needs to run deeper than the implementation of a particular program or an impressive zero tolerance policy. It needs to include the effort of getting down to the next layer and striving to understand school life from the students' perspective while remaining open to the development of whole-school practices that can significantly impact this next level of the social environment.

Bullying defined

It's important to carefully define bullying since not everything unpleasant that happens to a child at school fits this particular category. There are a number of accepted definitions, all containing the idea that bullying consists of “repeated negative actions or treatment by a more powerful person or group against someone who cannot effectively resist” (Rigby et al., 1997).

Power may arise from superior strength, maturity, peer status or peer support. It can be physical in nature, verbal, or indirect—through social aggression (Olweus, 1991). Social aggression can manifest itself through exclusion, rumour spreading, or the use of ‘relationships as a weapon’ (Simmons, 2002; 3). There are at least three features to help identify bullying behaviour (Flynt & Morton, 2008):

1. The harassment of the victim occurs over time;

2. The acts are harmful;
3. An imbalance of power is apparent.

Table 1 summarises forms of bullying which may occur (Rigby, 2007, 20; Sullivan, 2000, 14).

Cyberbullying

It is generally accepted that social and technological change provides further opportunities for the predatory behaviour of some people (Broad & Butterfield, 2001). Cyberbullying is defined as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). It is sobering to realise that students are potentially threatened with bullying and predation any time they are online or communicate electronically. The power of the bully comes, in part, through being able to remain anonymous (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

The safety and security of being behind a computer screen appears to free individuals from some of the traditional constraining morals and ethics that would normally moderate face to face behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). A survey by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) that drew 571 respondents revealed 11% who reported bullying others online and 29% who reported being the victim of online bullying. Cyberbullying was reported as being most common in chat rooms, followed by computer text messages, email and bulletin boards. The use of a cell phone to bully was relatively low compared to these other means. Studies have shown that, like traditional school bullying, there are real consequences for the victims, including school problems and delinquency (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007).

The West Australian Government last year promised \$400,000 towards what is claimed to be a world-first study into the prevention of cyber bullying among children and young people (Youth Studies Australia, 2008).

Myth-busters

Over the years, a number of myths have continued to proliferate regarding student peer bullying. Myths often take on a life of their own, and are most effective when there is a sliver of truth woven within.

Myth 1: Bullying doesn't occur at our school

“Bullying occurs in all schools to a greater degree than most people acknowledge” (Sullivan, 2000, 15). To admit this is an important first step for schools to take. Not all schools suffer the same amount of bullying, with some being considerably better than others. Olweus (1993) reports schools where the extent of bullying was four to five times higher than another school within the same community.

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Table 1: Forms of bullying

	Direct	Indirect
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hitting • spitting • throwing objects • biting • pulling hair • locking in a room • pinching • pushing • scratching • property damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting another person to commit direct physical acts
Non-physical verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • verbal insults • name calling • abusive language • abusive telephone calls • abusive electronic messages • extortion • intimidation • racist remarks • sexually suggestive remarks • spiteful teasing • sending poisonous notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spreading rumours • persuading another person to insult someone
Non-verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threatening gestures • obscene gestures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ignoring • isolating • deliberate exclusion from group or activity • manipulating and / or ruining friendships • removing and hiding belongings

“*It is odd that we don't generally tolerate abuse in other parts of society or claim it to have positive effects, yet often accept it as a part of school life for children*”

A study by Orpinas et al. (2003) reports on a school-wide approach to create a more positive environment in a large public elementary school. This resulted in a 40% reduction in self-reported aggression, and a 19% reduction in self reported victimisation, among the younger children.

Myth 2: Bullying is character building. It helps develop resilience and teaches children to stand up for themselves.

Bullying, like other forms of abuse, relies on an imbalance of power. It results in isolation and the lowering of self-esteem, until many feel worthless (Sullivan, 2000, 15). It is odd that we don't generally tolerate abuse in other parts of society or claim it to have positive effects, yet often accept it as a part of school life for children, who are most vulnerable.

Effects of bullying on the victim

Children who are bullied suffer a significant increase in a wide variety of health issues. Studies such

as those by Williams et al. (1996) and Due et al. (2005) show that victimised children are much more likely to suffer from sleeping problems, bed wetting, headaches, tummy aches, and depressive symptoms. Increased frequency of bullying was shown to have a significant correlation for all reported health problems.

There is convincing evidence of a link between bullying and rates of suicide (Rigby, 2007, 56). This was recently highlighted by the Australian media (e.g. Herald Sun, February 26, 2009) in reporting the suicide of 17 year-old Alleem Halkic, who took his life earlier this year. His parents reported evidence of cyberbullying in the weeks before his death. Also quoted in the same media article is youth worker Les Twentyman who claims to know of 10 teenagers who have taken their lives in the past 8 months due to cyberbullying. A Korean study by Kim et al. (2005) reported an increase in suicidal behaviours and / or ideation of 1.9 times the normal for children who are regularly bullied and / or bully.

Research by Vossekui et al. (2002) demonstrates a strong link between traditional bullying victims and serious forms of school violence. In two thirds of the 37 shootings in the USA that occurred between 1974 and 1999, the shooters felt “persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident” (Vossekui et al., 2002, 7). Following the fatal shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, the challenge to address bullying gained momentum in the USA with the revelation that the two teens involved in the massacre had been ostracised by many of their classmates.

The feelings of isolation and the loss of self-esteem can follow the victims into adulthood (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997). Dietz (1994) completed research showing that adults who were bullied as children suffered from significantly more depression and exhibited increased difficulty in forming close, intimate relationships. A significant link has also been found between being bullied at school and being at risk of being bullied in later life (Smith et al., 2003).

It is true that a number of children are able to shrug off incidences of bullying, particularly at the mild end of the scale. However, to ignore its effect on many others due to a faulty perception that all children need to do is ‘toughen up’, simply encourages the continuance of the cycle of abuse that happens all too frequently within schools.

Effects of bullying on the perpetrator

A study by Olweus (1999) showed that around 60% of children characterised as bullies in year 6–9 were convicted of at least one crime by the age of 24. This compares to 23% who were not characterised as either bullies or victims. In addition, 40% of bullies had three or more convictions by the age of 24, compared to 10% who had no involvement in bullying.

A study by Pepler et al. (2001) revealed that adolescents who bully others are almost five times more likely to report alcohol use and around seven times more likely to report using drugs than their peers. It is perhaps unsurprising that a correlation exists linking those who bully in elementary school to those who bully at high school and college level (Chapell et al., 2006). There is also evidence to suggest adolescents who frequently bully others are at high risk for transferring these relationship patterns to other forms of power and aggression, such as workplace harassment, domestic violence and child abuse (Pepler et al., 2006). A survey of 5288 adults in Great Britain (Smith et al., 2003) demonstrated a link between those who bully at school and those who go on to bully in the

workplace. Pepler et al. (2008a) comments on this important link:

Children who persistently bully have failed to learn critical relationship skills and attitudes. Such children experience a wide range of physical and mental health problems and are in need of focused support to enable them to move on to healthy relationships—the foundation of well-being throughout the lifespan.

It is significant to note that bullies suffer from many of the same overall health problems that the victim does, including more psychosocial issues than their peers (Holt et al., 2007). The most-at-risk group are the bully-victims, who both bully and are bullied by others.

Myth 3: Teachers know how to handle bullying. They're trained to deal with it.

Most teachers haven't received training in how to deal with bullying. A New Zealand study by Adair et al. (2000) found a relatively small percentage of children reported bullying and perceived teachers as intervening infrequently. Many students believe that teachers are quite unable to help resolve cases of bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007). It's not surprising that most (particularly older students) are unwilling to inform teachers if they are bullied, or if they observe bullying taking place.

Myth 4: We were just having fun! Can't you take a joke?

While the perpetrators may perceive they are just having fun, the effects on the victim remain. Naturally, there is playful teasing that happens between friends that can be harmless. However, school communities need to clearly understand the difference between this, and the victimisation that can occur in the name of 'having fun'.

Blanco (2008, 41–42), in reflecting on her own experiences at school, writes the following poignant comments:

There are millions of others who are just as ashamed and embarrassed about it as I am. We work, we dream, we marry, have kids and grow old, and rarely does anyone ever suspect the truth. Our classmates put a hole in us, and our self-esteem keeps falling out...Everyone needs to feel they belong. When you denied us that, you stole something that we have spent out entire lives trying to get back...And the worst part is that most of you never meant to hurt us. You probably don't even remember making fun of us.

Myth 5: Everything unpleasant that happens between children is bullying.

There are many times that interpersonal problems which occur between children do not fit the bullying

“Adults who were bullied as children suffered from significantly more depression and exhibited increased difficulty in forming close intimate relationships”

category. They may still be very hurtful and in need of teacher intervention, but it's important not to confuse them with bullying. Time and care needs to be taken to distinguish accurately between the two.

Myth 6: Bullies are all 'thick kids' from dysfunctional homes and are pathologically destined to malign others

Researchers acknowledge a wide range of factors that can cause bullying to occur. These include developmental, genetic, environmental and social factors. It is certainly true that particular groups are over-represented, such as children who experience dysfunctional family life in which they feel unloved and / or overly controlled (Rigby, 2003). These children may grow up without experiencing or developing empathy and therefore struggle to have empathetic regard for others. Low cooperativeness is another characteristic that can be a predictor of bullying behaviour (Rigby et al., 1997).

In many cases, bullies present as ordinary kids who target people who are different from themselves and "seek to exploit those differences" (Aluede et al., 2008). Although some bullies are themselves disliked, many are popular and socially skilled students whose 'put downs' of certain students gives them approval from their peers and additional social status. Their ability to use their social skills in positive student-teacher relationships often makes them less likely to be identified as a potential bully. In short, bullying problems need to be seen as arising from "complex interpersonal dynamics rather than simply from a child's problems with aggression" (Pepler et al., 2008a).

Another distinction was made by Rigby (2007, 17) when he coined the phrases "non-malign bullying" and "malign bullying". Non-malign bullying can be associated with "mindless bullying" where the perpetrator isn't motivated by malice and does not exhibit the typical hostility. However, it needs to be remembered that the hurt and distress experienced by the victim is just as real.

Myth 7: Bully victims are kids who have been over-protected and are just too sensitive.

Just as there is a wide range of reasons why bullying occurs, there is an equally wide range of reasons why a person becomes a victim. Sullivan (2000, 26) identifies three groups who are over-represented in the group. Firstly, there are the children who are inclined to be introverted, suffer from low self-esteem, and have less social skills such as assertiveness. Secondly, there are children who tend to be provocative, causing tension and irritation around them. Thirdly, there is the most at-risk group, the bully / victims who, being stronger and more confident, bully others and are bullied. Smokowski and Kopasz (2005) note that victimised children may

come from families that are over-protective or over-involved in their child's life because of the anxiety and insecurity they recognise in their child. Two studies completed by Rigby et al. (1997) identified a lack of cooperation that, as well as being an identifying trait of bullies, was also a characteristic of many victims. There are also children who are bullied simply because they are different from the dominant peer group in some way.

Myth 8: Bullying is predominantly a boy's problem

Aggressive behaviour in girls has long been considered not as prevalent as in boys. However, some believe there may be measurement concerns with the self-report questionnaires often used (Pepler et al., 2006). In some observational research, the difference between the rates of bullying of boys and girls is not as great as previous surveys indicate (Pepler et al., 2004, cited in Pepler et al., 2008b).

There is certainly a marked difference in the way boys and girls bully (Owens & MacMullin, 1995). Boys use more direct aggression, while girls use more indirect approaches such as exclusion and the manipulation of friendships.

Simmons (2002, 3) concludes that this hidden aggression is "epidemic, distinctive, and destructive".

Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives. In this world, friendship is a weapon, and the sting of a shout pales in comparison to a day of someone's silence. There is no gesture more devastating than the back turning away.

In Conclusion

Every school should recognise the extent of bullying and take the necessary steps to prevent it. There is evidence that appropriate school interventions can make a significant impact on the incidence of bullying. As long as bullying is downplayed or ignored, students will continue to suffer harm that can cause lifelong damage to both victims and those who bully (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). **TEACH**

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