

Bullying: Dilemmas, Definitions, And Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Bullying has become an increasingly serious problem in today's schools. Many states have passed legislation to ensure schools do all they can to prevent and address bullying. Even though the school is a place that is to be safe for all children, in some instances this is not the case. This paper discusses bullying and focuses on the different tactics students who bully use at middle levels. Educators can prevent problems by becoming aware of where bullying takes place and how educators can cope and confront this problem. Discussed are tactics to create new programs and policies and what process it takes to implement the most sound and fair policy in a school. Different roles and procedures are discussed to help educators include all stakeholders in the process. Detailed analysis and descriptions are presented and differentiated and various plans to be implemented are described.

Keywords: bullying, middle level, administrators

INTRODUCTION

Jessica slumped into a deep depression after months of harassment at school. Throughout the last several months, students had been making fun of her; fellow students called her names, ignored her, and even left cruel notes in her locker. After many family meetings and countless discussions with school administrators, the situation didn't improve. Jessica's parents came to the decision that the only way to improve the problem was to switch school districts. After much thought and consideration, the family moved. The situation didn't improve. Jessica was still bullied and six months after the family moved, she committed suicide.

A story like this is all too real and happens too often. The loss of young lives in vain and young adolescents saying and doing inappropriate things have been a problem for many years. Adolescents are more than twice as likely as senior high students to be a victim of school aggression (Walker, D., 2007). "One-third to half of America's children report being bullied at least once a month...in a typical room of 20 students, 2 or 3 come to school every day fearing being bullied..." (Sadker, D.M., Sadker, M.P., & Zittleman, K.R., 2006, p. 200). The main question is why? Why do children use guns and inflict violence on others and themselves? Researchers have found that the connections to these violent crimes are closely connected to bullying in the educational arena. This topic is of special interest to middle level administrators because research has shown that bullying tends to occur most at the middle school level (Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Bonds, 2000).

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Students need to feel safe from fear, apprehension, and low self-concept to be fully motivated to learn in middle schools. Too often schools are faced with students who avoid attending classes because of the severe intimidation and embarrassment they feel. Although the common layperson's conceptions may envision a bully as intimidating by physical means, many times bullies are simply bigger and stronger when dealing with self-esteem. These bullies seek out victims that clearly show signs of emotional weakness. Bullying has been defined as hostile actions, recurring over time, that is deliberately destructive and occurs without provocation (Harris & Petrie, 2002). There are many differing definitions; however, the main component is that bullying is a subtype of violent behavior. They all seek to achieve control and power over others (Espelage, 2003; Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

With the many forms of bullying come many types of aggression. Some of these actions are often characterized as good-natured teasing by some. But gone are the days when good-natured teasing meant building your character, as well as with the saying "just let it roll off your back". It has become such a problem that many schools are required, by law, to enact "anti-bullying" policies.

DIRECT TACTICS

Direct tactics are those that are done directly to the victim (Harris & Petrie, 2002, p. 2). More specifically, these acts can be classified in more detail as physical bullies who will hit, kick, shove, spit on others, steal, use weapons, and display other similar behaviors. Another subgroup is the verbal bullies. Actions of this group may include, but are not limited to, name-calling, scoffing, making racial, ethnic or similar comments, or ruthless bantering (Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Harris & Petrie). Although bullying has no gender boundaries, these types of tactics are more closely related to boys (Harris & Petrie, 2002; Cruickshank, D.R., Jenkins, D.B. & Metcalf, K.K, 2006).

INDIRECT BULLYING

This tactic, also known as relational bullying, is usually more common among the female students. While female students are becoming more physically aggressive, more common tactics, such as spreading rumors, intentionally excluding, or influencing others to do certain behaviors, is commonplace when describing this method of bullying (Harrison & Petrie, 2002; Cruickshank, D.R. et al., 2006; Sheras, 2002; Milsom & Gallo, 2006). Because this type of bullying does not include physical harm and can be done without any clear evidence, it is difficult to get a firm grasp on what is happening quickly, thus, allowing this to continue for periods of time, longer than expected.

WHERE IS BULLYING TAKING PLACE?

Research has shown that bullying is taking place most often in the middle school arena. Harris and Hathorn further supported this idea when they stated, "middle school is a critical time for bullying or relational aggression to occur" (2006, pg. 4). According to Harris and Petrie (2002), 92% of middle school students said that some form of bullying was happening while they were at school.

Nelson, Kuskie, & Reznick found administrators of younger students felt that bullying was most likely to occur on the way to school. Administrators of older students believed it was more likely to occur in the hallways during the day (2007). It is important to note that the perceptions of administrators can be greatly skewed and they may not know what is actually happening to the students. There are many areas of the school itself that provide ample opportunities for bullies to torment other students. Harris and Petrie's study (2002) concluded that 83% of students saw bullying take place while at lunch. Harris and Hathorn (2006) supported this finding with their study of bullying that found boys felt most bullying took place during lunch and extra-curricular activities. It was also concluded that girls experienced or witnessed bullying most often at lunch. This area is closely followed by the classroom with 77% of students stating they saw bullying take place. Students acknowledged that bullying did occur both on the way to and from school, but a high percent (62%) was given to bullying happening while on the way home from school. Only 34% were harassed on the way to school (Harris & Hathorn). Milsom and Gallo concluded that most instances occurred at lunch, recess, in class, and to and from school (2006).

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT TO ADMINISTRATORS?

School violence has become a widely publicized subject in recent years. Litigation over bullying is at an all time high. With more and more shootings on school property, students fighting, and the ever present girls bickering, educators have devoted increased efforts to find solutions. Solutions can only be found when we first understand what causes the violence. Educators around the world are too often unaware of the elements that create an atmosphere for violence (Harris & Hathorn, 2006). When educators treat bullying as normal developmental behavior and ignore bullying incidents as minor problems, it becomes more difficult to impose penalties for inappropriate behavior. The educational setting is not only a central place for students to learn, but it is also an important arena for social development (Harris & Hathorn). Schools are no longer just a place where reading, writing, and arithmetic are

studied; it has become a place where students need to be learning social skills and self-esteem. This component of education has made it important that administrators acknowledge that bullying has happened and is happening and to find programs to help bring it under control.

One policy that has been enacted into law by the state of Missouri is the *Safe Schools Act*. This act was passed in 1996 and deals primarily with acts of violence and crime in the schools. This act provided literature and assistance to schools when dealing with major acts of assault, controlled substances, and/or false or real bomb threats. Yet, it did not provide any information or help on how to understand and deal with the school bullies. The *Safe Schools Act* provided assistance only after the bully has turned to violence. Schools are left on their own to develop a bullying intervention programs. According to the updated *Safe Schools Act of 2000* section 160.775, school districts had to adopt an anti-bullying policy no later than September 1, 2007, which exemplified the dire need of control of such acts in our schools today.

Implementing a system of supervision is crucial. Where research has shown bullying happened most frequently, it was demonstrated that poor and little supervision by an administrator or faculty member was present. Often supervisors overlooked or ignored the bullying, which reinforced the action of the bully (Harrison & Hathorn). Harris and Petrie (2002) supported Levister's findings suggesting that "middle school students perceived their teachers (59%) and administrators (73%) as 'not interested' or they 'didn't know' if they were interested in reducing bullying on their campuses" (pg. 7).

For administrators to fight bullying in their schools, cooperation is required among everyone involved. This means that the students, faculty, administrators, staff, and parents are going to have to work together to create a safe and secure environment for all students. A comprehensive plan needs to be developed and consistently followed at all times and for all offenses.

USING THE RIGHT TACTICS TO SET POLICY

With increased research focused on this problem, there are many criteria that have been found to help stop and/or prevent bullying. Some recommendations are that the adults of the school need to be primarily responsible for assuring this problem is addressed. Clear goals, mission, policies, and consequences need to be set out for all students. To create such a monumental task, some researchers have found that enlisting a variety of stakeholders on a committee can play a beneficial role in the foundation of such actions. Members of such a committee should not only include faculty and administration, but also parents and other staff members, such as cooks and bus drivers. It is also suggested that including an actual bully, victim and/or witness would be beneficial to the team (Freid & Freid, 1996). In some instances, witnesses to bullying believed the actions were done without malevolent purpose, but the sufferers believed the behavior had malicious intent (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). With this wide variance of belief, including students from both sides would be most beneficial in policy making. When such a task is taken on, if it begins at the grassroots level, it is more likely to have a successful conclusion and implementation. Control needs to be given to those who are accountable and who are committed to the safety of the students and school.

WHY INCLUDE PARENTS?

To bring school bullies under control, it is apparent we must start with the children's family unit (Fried & Fried, 1996). Children whose parents have reinforced the positive behavior at home often have modeled these skills at school. Therefore, it is important that parents are involved with the decision-making process for their child in the school setting.

THE TEACHERS' ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Teachers must be made aware that bullying is taking place in their classrooms and hallways. It is of utmost importance that each faculty and staff member monitor such behavior so it can be stopped immediately and ultimately prevented. If we are to expect the adults of the school to understand and respond to bullying appropriately, special training must be given (Fried & Fried, 1996). Students responded better to teachers who were trained in and are able to provide positive feedback, as well as educators who themselves modeled the appropriate

social skills. The greatest change that will have to be overcome is "defending the bully and their behavior as part of growing up" (Cohn & Canter, 2003, p. 4). Many students have continued to suffer because some teachers see that this form of bullying is just a simple rite of passage. Every report must be taken seriously and acted on appropriately.

Using the student advisement period to work on areas, such as conflict resolution, self-esteem, respect, anger management and other similar topics, can aid in the fight to stop the senseless rage. This can assist students in mediating problems. When a teacher builds a strong relationship with his/her students, they are more apt to have the ability to see problems with their students and act accordingly. Additional advisement topics, such as "how to treat people", "respect", "coping skills", "friendship-making", "empathy", and "social skills", can aid in the prevention of negative behaviors among students. According to Bonds (2000), the "HA HA SO" acronym gives students a method to evade bully "victimization" (p. 7). The following could be a lesson taught to every student, regardless if they are a bully, have been/are victimized, or have no experience with bullying:

Help - Seek assistance from an adult, friend, or peer when a potentially threatening situation arises or when other strategies aren't working.

Assert Yourself - Make assertive statements to the bully, addressing your feelings about the bully's behavior.

Humor - Use humor to de-escalate a situation.

Avoid - Walk away or avoid certain places in order to avoid a bullying situation.

Self-Talk - Use positive self-talk to maintain positive self-esteem.

Own It - "Own" the put-down or belittling comment in order to diffuse it (pg. 6).

These simple lessons/units will benefit the students being bullied and the students who are bullying. Simple classroom meetings discussing what is happening in their lives can also be monumental.

THE STUDENTS

Along with educating parents and teachers, our students must be educated about bullies. What to do when confronted by a bully and how to turn the event into a positive action are life lessons we must teach. According to Fried and Fried (1996), when most students were asked why some people become bullies, students correctly responded that these individuals needed attention, wanted power, and did not have confidence in themselves. It is apparent that students are educated on why others bully, but they are not empowered on how to handle the situation when they are being bullied. "It is important and necessary to consider what the bully perceives as the child's weaknesses - the point of vulnerability that he/she has tried to hide" (Sheras, 2002, p. 117). Once you have found this area, it is important that the area is addressed to find a solution that will help make the student less vulnerable. The adult figure in this situation must make certain that the resolution provided does not make the victim believe that his/her rights have been overruled (Sheras, 2002). The solution decided upon should help the victim gain control of his/her vulnerability and not make them feel worse. The greatest effort should be placed on empowering the victim in finding an adequate solution that he/she finds acceptable. Many of these solutions can be gained through prevention programs, through school wide activities, advisement, and good, consistent policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the resources available to the administration can play a vital role in the prevention of bullying. "Early intervention with bullies and their victims are key to preventing catastrophic events at your school" (Walker, 2007). Research shows that increasing teacher knowledge of bullying can "help them recognize how they can intervene" (pg. 6) and in turn decrease the acts of violence (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). How teachers gain this knowledge can come in many ways. Allowing teachers to attend conferences relating to this topic can be very helpful. In-school in-service training can increase teachers' knowledge as well. Too often, teachers go to meetings or receive in-service training with no follow-up plan. Follow-up support throughout the school year is important in gaining and maintaining teachers' understanding and knowledge when dealing with such issues (Milsom & Gallo).

It is vitally important that there is a school-wide program in place. Before the program can be effective, all stakeholders must buy into the notion that bullying is taking place, must be stopped, and whatever program is in

place must be fully supported by all. The program must not only aim at the classroom, but the school setting, students, parents, and community (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). Each school program needs to be created and/or modified by local stakeholders to be most effective. Support for victims needs to be a priority of every school. Without a support system, the sufferers feel they have nowhere to turn (Milsom & Gallo). In a negative climate where bullying is taking place, not only the victim, but those who witness such actions, feel threatened which, in turn, will affect all aspects of their abilities (social, emotional, and academic). A positive school climate will decrease any negative actions (Bonds, 2000; Milsom & Gallo, 2006). To gain a positive climate can sometimes seem like an uphill battle, but the effort is worth every ounce of energy put forth.

CONCLUSION

Bullying has become a major concern in many schools across the United States. School shootings, fights, and verbal abuse have created many fearful settings for our students today. Obviously, the increase in abuse has led to program development that helps ensure students' safety. Many times the bullying process can be decreased through the use of good supervision. Areas of major concern, such as the lunch room, extra curricular activities, and buses, need to have more and better supervision. These supervisors must make themselves visible at all times. Supervisors should not only be there to watch the students, but interact with them in a positive way. When a student has mistreated another student, they will not have learned anything different if they are mistreated by the supervisor. A school-wide policy needs to be in place from the very beginning. Emphasis should be placed on those who are successful. The policy should contain a system that promotes and rewards those who are consistent in following the rules and the policy. The policy should involve the school counselors and advisors more intensely and improve the discipline climate of the school, and train teachers to identify bullying and specific strategies to prevent and/or reduce bullying. This policy should be the cooperative effort of students, parents, teachers, and administrators; thus most effectively promoting the involvement and responsibility of all parties involved.

Bullying is a major issue which our children are faced with everyday. It would seem that just surviving adolescence is difficult enough; some students now have to survive the taunting, teasing, and feelings of ostracism by fellow classmates. Many former students can remember their own adolescence and the trials and tribulation that were felt. Some people will tell us that a little teasing is what makes us tough, makes us capable of dealing with the reality of the adult world. But, where is the fine line between good-nature teasing and downright mean-spirited taunting of individuals? We have to recognize that some schools are fast becoming arenas for hatred and violence. To prevent and stop bullying will decrease the number of new offenses found in the school. At some point, reactive bullies surface. Once bullied, they in turn become bullies themselves (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). What we do as administrators could have long-lasting effects for our students. According to Rigby, "The principal of the school plays a vital role in the prevention of bullying. In fact, the principal's leadership style and level of commitment, coupled with the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and parents, are significant in the reduction of bullying" (Harris & Petrie, 2002, p. 6). Nothing positive comes from bullying. The everlasting effects on students can cause negative physical, emotional, social, and academic harm to all students involved.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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