

Bullying: a major barrier to student learning

Estimates indicate that as many as 8 percent of urban junior and senior high school students miss one day of school each month because they are afraid to attend.

School staff are painfully aware that bullying is by far the biggest violence problem on many school campuses in many countries. Bullying is repeated harassment, abuse, oppression, or intimidation of another individual physically or psychologically. It can take the form of teasing, threatening, taunting, rejecting (socially isolating someone), hitting, stealing, and so forth. A bully is someone who engages in such acts fairly often. Bullies often claim they were provoked and appear to lack empathy for their victims.

Best estimates are that approximately 15% of students either bully or are bullied regularly. Direct physical bullying is reported as decreasing with age (peaking in the middle school). Verbal abuse seems not to abate. While more boys than girls are bullies, the problem is far from limited to males. Girls tend to use less direct strategies (e.g., spreading malicious rumors and shunning). Bullies may act alone or in groups.

As with other forms of violence, the conditions at school can minimize or worsen bullying. To reduce violence and promote well-being, schools must create caring, supportive, and safe environments and generate a sense of community.

Why Kids Bully and How Bullies Differ

Many underlying factors can lead to acting out or externalizing behavior. Those who bully tend to come from homes where problems are handled by physical punishment and physically striking out. This is frequently paired with caretaking that lacks warmth and empathy.

From a motivational perspective, the roots are in experiences that threaten one's feelings of competence, self-determination, or relatedness to others or that directly produce negative feelings about such matters.

What causes acting out behavior to take the form of bullying is unclear. Initially, bullying behavior may be "modeled" and/or encouraged by significant others (e.g., imitating family members or peers).

Over time, it is likely that bullying develops because a youngster (1) finds the aggression enhances feelings of competence, self-determination, or connection with valued others and (2) perceives the costs of bullying as less than the "benefits." Some bullies seem to use the behavior mostly as a reactive defense; others seem to find so much satisfaction in the behavior that it becomes a proactive way of life.

Unfortunately, much of the current literature on interventions to address bullying focuses on the behavior, per se. Too little attention is paid to underlying causes. Relatedly, there is little discussion of different types of bullying. And, solutions are often narrow programs (usually emphasizing only skill development), rather than comprehensive approaches to prevention and intervention.

When different types of bullying are considered, it helps interveners to differentiate how best to approach the problem. In particular, understanding the causes of the behavior helps place discussion of social/prosocial skills in proper context. Such understanding underscores that in many cases the problem is not one of undeveloped skills, and thus, the solution in such instances is not simply skill training. Indeed, the central task confronting the intervener often is to address motivational considerations. This encompasses the underlying motivation for not using already developed skills and/or finding ways to enhance motivation for acquiring and practicing under-developed skills.

For example, a great deal of bullying at school is done by groups "ganging up" on students who are "different." Many of those doing the bullying wouldn't engage in this activity on their own, and most probably know and can demonstrate appropriate social skills in other situations.

In this example, the cause of the problem indicates the focus of intervention should be on the subgroup and school culture, rather than specific individuals. Currently, this includes human relations programs (including strategies to enhance motivation to resist inappropriate peer pressure) and environment-oriented approaches (e.g., intended to create a sense of community and caring culture in schools). Such interventions require broad-based leadership on the part of staff and students. The essence of the work is to maximize inclusion of all students in the social support fabric of the school and, in the process, to minimize scapegoating and alienation.

Other students may bully in an attempt to feel a degree of mastery and control over situations in which their sense of competence is threatened by daily academic failure. These students often are expressing frustration and anger at the broader system by targeting someone more vulnerable than themselves. It is not uncommon for such students to have requisite social skills, but to manifest them only in the absence of threats to their sense of well-being. Here, too, an understanding of cause can help interveners address the source of frustration.

In the American Educational Research Journal (2004), Watts and Erevelles stress that "most pragmatic responses to school violence seek to assign individual blame and to instill individual responsibility in students." From the perspective of the intersection of critical race theory and materialistic disability studies, they argue that "school violence is the result of the structural violence of oppressive social conditions that force students (especially low-income, male African American and Latino students) to feel vulnerable, angry, and resistant to the normative expectations of prison-like school environments."

Some students do lack social awareness and skills and end up bullying others because they lack the ability to establish positive peer relationships. Their problem often is compounded by the frustration and anger of not knowing alternatives. In such cases, probably any contemporary synthesis of social skills and any rigorous theory of moral development provide important insights and relevant frameworks to guide intervention.

A few other youngsters fall into a more proactive category of bullying. These are students whose behavior is not motivated by peer pressure, and they are not reacting to threats to their feelings of competence, self-determination, or connection to others. They are unmoved by efforts to create a caring community. Instead, they proactively, persistently, and chronically seek ways to intimidate others, apparently motivated by the "pleasure" they derive from their actions.

In the Forward to the fourth (2001) edition of Indicators of School Crime and Safety <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iscs01.pdf> Gary Phillips (Acting Commissioner of Education Statistics) & Lawrence Greenfeld (Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics) state:

The safety of our students, teachers, and staff at school continues to be the focus of considerable national attention. National indicators affirm that the levels of crime in school have continued to decline, that acts that promote fear and detract from learning are decreasing,

and that students feel more safe in school than they did a few years ago. Despite declining rates, students ages 12 through 18 were victims of about 2.5 million crimes of violence or theft at school in 1999. Violence, theft, bullying, drugs, and firearms still remain problems in many schools throughout the country and periodically the news headlines relate the details of a tragic event in a school somewhere in America.

As the report stresses, the goal remains one of ensuring that schools are safe and secure places for all students, teachers, and staff members. "Without a safe learning environment, teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn."

By now it should be evident that bullying is a complex and multi-determined phenomenon. As such, comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches are needed to address the problem. These can be built on the resources of the family, teachers and other school staff, and community support networks. The process involves enhancing a caring and socially supportive climate throughout the school and in every classroom, as well as providing assistance to individual students and families.

As bullying becomes a hot political topic, there is a risk that bullying intervention will be another project-of-the-year for schools. If project thinking prevails, another golden opportunity to improve student support systems will be lost.

For those concerned with moving in new directions for student support, it is essential to resist "project mentality." Projects exacerbate the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and overspecialization that characterizes the student support enterprise.

Rather than pursuing one more discrete intervention, it is essential to use each initiative to catalyze and leverage systemic change. The aim should be to take another step toward transforming how schools go about ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. This means proceeding in ways that establish a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach so each school can address barriers to student learning effectively.

At this point, however, the first concern is staff development to enhance understanding of bullying.

See the specially developed Center Quick Training Aid entitled:

Bullying Prevention
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/bullyingprevention.pdf>