

Fact Sheet

BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Bullying is a significant problem that affects a vast amount of children all over the world. Prevalence rates indicate anywhere from 10% (Nansel et al., 2001) to 45% (Haynie et al., 2001) of students are involved in bullying at school as either bully or victim, although these figures vary significantly as a function of how bullying is measured. When bystanders are included in prevalence calculations, the rate of involvement can increase to over 90% (Salmivalli, 1999; Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008).

Educators, parents, communities, and policy makers have responded to bullying and its possible detrimental outcomes with increased attention to the causes and impact of bullying behavior and with implementation of innovative anti-bullying programs across the country.

Scope of the Problem

According to Olweus (1994), bullying is defined as a distinct form of aggression involving persistent perpetration and unequal distribution of power. This aggression is typically manifested through physical (e.g., hitting or pushing), verbal (e.g., name calling or making threats), or relational means (e.g., actions such as social exclusion, aimed directly at damaging or controlling relationships).

Bullies

The association between bullying and detrimental outcomes is well established in extant literature. For instance, studies have shown that bullies are significantly more likely to be convicted of a criminal offense when they are adults than their non-involved peers (Olweus, 1997; Sourander et al., 2006). In addition, bullies appear to be at heightened risk for experiencing psychiatric problems including internalizing disorders such as severe depression and increases in suicidal ideation (Klomek et al., 2008; Kumpulainen et al., 1998), difficulties in romantic relationships (Craig & Pepler, 2003; Pepler et al., 2006), and substance abuse problems (Hourbe, Targuinio, Thuillier, & Hergott, 2006).

Victims

Compared to non-victimized counterparts, victims of bullying are more likely to be anxious and insecure (Olweus, 1978), exhibit higher rates of depression (Hawker &

Boulton, 2000), diminished performance in school (Hanish & Guerra, 2002), and are lonelier and lower in self-esteem (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). In one of the few longitudinal studies of bullied individuals, those who were victimized as children were at greater risk for negative consequences such as internalizing disorders in adulthood (Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006).

Bystanders

Most research focuses on identified bullies and victims, and therefore overlooks the important role of bystanders. Although these individuals are not directly involved, they may in fact offer positive feedback to bullies by silently endorsing aggressive behavior (Salmivalli, 1999). Bystanders provide an audience and may provoke bullies through reinforcing behaviors such as laughter.

Bystanders are at risk for detrimental outcomes as well. For a number of reasons, these individuals may become distracted from learning. For example, they may be afraid to associate with victims in fear of becoming victims themselves or they may fail to report incidents of bullying for fear of being labeled a snitch. Moreover, they may develop feelings of guilt and helplessness from being unable to control incidents of bullying. It is important to note that the negative outcomes associated with witnessing bullying behavior as a bystander have been found regardless of one's own status as a victim (Rivers, Poterat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009).

Risk Factors

Bullying

Several characteristics have been identified as risk factors for bullying behavior and the extant literature has typically focused on two principal frameworks: one that emphasizes individual factors, and one that emphasizes contextual factors, particularly schools, in relation to bullying. Although prior research has emphasized a range of individual correlates and predictors of involvement in bullying including genetic, biological, and cognitive predictors, much attention has been on social-emotional factors.

While research indicates that bullies may be lower in empathy than non-involved peers, the research on self-esteem is less clear (Endresen & Olweus, 2001). Although intuitively appealing to expect high self-esteem to predict more prosocial behavior and low self-esteem to predict aggression and bullying, empirical findings are mixed. Some studies have found that bullying is associated with low self-esteem (Andreou, 2001; Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), whereas other studies have demonstrated a relation between low self-esteem and lower levels of involvement in bullying (e.g., Schneider & Leitenberg, 1989) or no relation at all (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999; Seals & Young, 2003).

In terms of school characteristics, one of the most salient factors involved in bullying behavior is the social support individuals receive from both adults and peers at school (DeMaray & Malecki, 2003). Students who are disconnected from significant others

(such as teachers, faculty, administration, and other students) should be less likely to act in a cooperative and prosocial manner. This extends to student perceptions of school climate as well. Studies have found that students attending schools high in rates of conflict, with less of a perceived supportive environment, are more likely to participate in bullying (Nansel et al., 2001).

Victimization

Research on victims of bullying behavior has demonstrated that these individuals are more likely to report loneliness and greater difficulty making new friends compared to non-involved peers (Nansel et al, 2001). Victims have also been found to be lower in social acceptance, in terms of number of friends and amount of time socializing with other peers (Andreou, 2001). However, physical characteristics such as clothing, weight, wearing eyeglasses, etc., do not appear to be as important in predicting victimization.

Bullying Interventions

Most successful efforts to prevent or reduce bullying utilize an integrated and comprehensive approach (Olweus, 1993; Stephens, 1997; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998). According to Olweus (1993), efforts towards anti-bullying must incorporate schools, administrators, teachers, parents, and communities. In addition, creating a safe school environment depends on early intervention efforts, strong leadership, ongoing commitment, ongoing staff development and training, cultural sensitivity, and parental and community involvement in planning and implementation.

Given the complexity of bullying behavior, it is no surprise that most anti-bullying interventions have produced mixed results. For example, in a recent meta-analysis of intervention research, it was found that the majority of bullying outcomes showed no significant change (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). Extant interventions were more likely to alter knowledge, attitudes, and self-perceptions rather than actual bullying behaviors.

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Internet Resources

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: <http://www.aacap.org>

California Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center:
<http://www.caag.state.ca.us/cvpc>

California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov>

Center for the Prevention of School Violence: <http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv>

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/>

Children, Youth, and Families Education and Research Network:
<http://www.cyfernet.org/>

Family Education Network: <http://www.familyeducation.com>

National Resource Center for Safe Schools: <http://www.safetyzone.org>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>

Stop Bullying Now: www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/