

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CENTER OF EXCELLENCE ON YOUTH VIOLENCE
PREVENTION, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE**

Fact Sheet
BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

by Roxie Alcaraz

Introduction

Bullying in American schools and neighborhoods is not a new phenomenon. This form of aggression among children typically has been viewed as an acceptable and normal part of growing up. However, in recent years, bullying has come to the forefront of media and public scrutiny, particularly in the aftermath of school shootings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In fact, bullying is cited as a major contributing factor in the Columbine High School incident (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

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

Olweus (1993) defines bullying as follows: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.” Such negative actions are generally aggressive in nature and may take three forms, physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, pushing), verbal (e.g., taunting, name calling), and psychological (e.g., intimidation, spreading rumors, social exclusion).

Bullies

Boys are bullies more often than girls and usually bully other boys. Regardless of the gender of the victim, boys tend to use physical force or threats. Likewise, girls typically bully other girls, but do so verbally and indirectly more often than physically.

There are also long-term consequences for bullies. Children identified by age 8 as bullies are 6 times more likely to commit a crime by the time they are 24 and 5 times more likely by age 30 to have a serious criminal record. Crimes linked to bullying behavior include vandalism, shoplifting, and drug-related offenses. Other behaviors such as truancy, dropping out of school, and fighting are also related to bullying.

Victims

In a national survey conducted in 2001, students who ranged in age from 12-18 were asked if they had been bullied at school. Results from this study found that eight percent of the students reported that they had been bullied at school in the last six months (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The percentage of students who admitted to being bullied in 2001 is up from five percent in 1999. Males were more likely to be bullied than females. In addition, rates of being bullied increased for each ethnic group from 1999 to 2001 except for African American students. However, there were very few differences in the rates of being bullied among various ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Younger students were generally more likely to be bullied than older students. Fourteen percent of students in the 6th grade reported being bullied compared to only two percent of 12th grade students who reported being victims of bullying (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Common characteristics among victims are isolation, depression, and low self-esteem. Victims are at higher risk for a range of problems, including impairment in psychological and social functioning and deficits in school performance. In the most extreme cases, victims may contemplate or attempt suicide as an alternative to harassment and terrorization by their peers.

Bystanders

Most studies of bullying focus on identified bullies and victims. Such research often overlooks the effect of bullying on "bystanders" who witness bullying even though they do not participate directly. Among junior high and high school students, 88 percent report having observed bullying at some time.

Bystanders are distracted from learning in school for a number of reasons. For example, they may be afraid to associate with victims in fear of becoming victims themselves or they may fear reporting incidents of bullying for fear of gaining a reputation as a snitch. Additionally, they may develop feelings of guilt and helplessness from being unable to control incidents of bullying. In some cases, they may even succumb to peer pressure and become bullies themselves.

Risk Factors

Bullies

Several characteristics of children and families have been identified as risk factors for bullying behavior. In particular, children who thrive on power, need to be in control, and have little empathy for others are at risk of becoming bullies. Rather than displaying low self-esteem and anxiety, these children appear to have an over-inflated sense of self and high self esteem.

This type of aggressive bravado may be linked to problems in other settings. Indeed, research on how families can contribute to bullying has shown that children at risk of becoming bullies often come from homes where physical discipline and punishment are common and parental warmth is lacking. In these settings, children learn that the best way to deal with their problems is by dominating and controlling others. Alcohol or drug abuse, parental conflict, divorce, or mental illness of a family member can also put children at increased risk for becoming bullies.

Victims

Victim research has identified two types of victims: passive and provocative. The majority of victims of bullying are typically passive; these victims are often loners, younger than the bullies, and socially, emotionally, and physically weak. However, physical characteristics such as clothing, weight, wearing eyeglasses, etc., do not appear to be significant factors in victimization.

Promising Strategies

Most successful efforts to prevent or reduce bullying utilize an integrated and comprehensive approach (Olweus, 1993; Stephens, 1997; Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 1999; Prinz, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). According to Olweus (1993), efforts toward 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.

A number of anti-bullying programs have shown positive effects. For example, an elementary school in Englewood, Colorado reported that in a two-year period, their bully-proofing integrative program had a positive impact on the school environment. Another comprehensive program at a middle school in Caruthersville, Missouri resulted in a 16 percent reduction in physical fighting among students in the first year and a 25 percent reduction in the second year.

Another effective anti-bullying strategy is mixing age groups within programs (National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 1999). Bullying behavior tends to be higher in same age peer groups. However, mixing older and younger children in activities tends to foster nurturing and protective behavior by older children toward younger children and bullying is reduced. In addition, allowing bullies to take on protective roles, such as on a safety patrol, helps reduce bullying behavior.

References

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2001). Facts for Families: Bullying.
- Glover, D., Cartwright, N., & Gleeson, D. (1998). Towards Bully-free Schools: Interventions in Action. Bristol, PA: Open University Press.
- Hawkins, J.D., Farrington, D.P., & Catalano, R.F. (1998). Reducing violence through the schools. In D. Elliott, B. Hamburg, and K.R. Williams (Eds.), Violence in American Schools (pp. 188-216). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- National Resource Center for Safe Schools (1999). Recognizing and Preventing Bullying.
- Olweus, F. (1993). Bullying at School. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.
- Prinz, R. (2000). Research based prevention of school violence and youth antisocial behavior: a developmental and educational perspective. In National Institute of Justice (Ed.), Preventing School Violence: Plenary Papers of the 1999 Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation—Enhancing Policy and Practice Through Research, Volume 2 (pp. 23-36). Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice; Office of Justice Programs; National Institute of Justice.
- Stephens, R.D. (1997). National trends in school violence: statistics and Prevention strategies. In A. P. Goldstein and J. C. Conoley (Eds.), School Violence Intervention: A Practical Handbook (pp. 72-90). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- U.S. Department of Education (1998). Preventing Bullying: A Manual For Schools and Communities.
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Services (2003). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- U.S. Department of Justice (2001). Addressing the Problem of Juvenile Bullying.

Related Publications on Bullying

- Fried, S., & Fried, P. (1996). Bullies & Victims: Helping Your Child Through the Schoolyard Battlefield. New York: M. Evans & Co.
- Garrity, C., Jens, K., Porter, W., Sager, N., & Short-Camilli, C. (1994). Bully-Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Elementary Schools. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Olweus, D., & Limber, S. (1999). Blueprints for Violence Prevention: Bullying Prevention Program (Book Nine). Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

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>