Bullying: What It Is & What Schools Can Do About It

Q: What is school bullying?

A: School bullying can be described as a situation in which one or more students (the 'bullies') single out a child (the 'victim') and engage in behaviors intended to harm that child. A bully will frequently target the same victim repeatedly over time. A child who bullies can dominate the victim because the bully possesses more power than the victim. Compared to his or her victim, for example, the bully may be physically stronger or more intelligent, have a larger circle of friends, or possess a higher social standing. Bullying can inflict physical harm, emotional distress, and / or social embarrassment or humiliation.

Q: What conditions allow bullying to take place?

A: There are three essential components to any bullying situation. To start with, there must be a bully: an individual who voluntarily seeks out and attempts to victimize others. Another participant necessary for bullying to take place is a potential victim: a student who is substantially weaker than the bully in one or more significant ways. Bullying cannot happen, of course, unless there is also a location in which it can occur. School locations where bullying is common are often those with limited adult supervision, such as hallways, bathrooms, and playgrounds.

While not essential, student bystanders are a fourth important element that often impacts bullying: if witnesses are present when bullying occurs, these bystanders can play a pivotal role by choosing either to encourage the bully or to protect the victim.

Q: How big a problem is bullying in schools?

A: It is difficult to know precisely how widespread bullying is in any given school. Bullying tends to be a hidden activity, and both bullies and victims are usually reluctant to disclose to adults that it is taking place. The incidence of bullying also can vary greatly from school to school. Research suggests, though, that 7 percent or more of students may be bullies and perhaps 10-20 percent may be chronic victims of bullying.

Q: What are the different types of bullying?

A: Bullying can be direct or indirect. When bullying takes a direct form, the bully confronts the victim face-to-face. Examples of direct bullying would include situations in which the victim is verbally harassed or threatened, physically attacked (e.g., punched, kicked, pushed down), or socially embarrassed (e.g., taunted, refused a seat on the school bus).

In the case of indirect bullying, the bully attacks the victim's social standing or reputation-usually when the victim is not around. A student is engaging in indirect bullying if he or she spreads malicious gossip or writes insulting graffiti about a classmate, or organizes a peer group to ostracize that classmate. Victims are at a particular disadvantage in indirect bullying because they may never discover the identity of the person or group responsible for the bullying.

Q: Are there differences in bullying between boys and girls or at different age levels?

A: Some evidence suggests that a general shift from direct to indirect bullying takes place as children advance from elementary to middle and high school. At any grade level, boys are more likely than girls to report that they are victims of physical bullying. Schools may also tend to overlook the possibility that girls take part in bullying, both because of gender stereotypes (i.e., that girls are 'less aggressive' than boys) and because girls may prefer to bully using indirect means such as hurtful gossip that are difficult for adults to observe.

Q: Why do some children bully? What is the 'payoff' for them?

A: There are several reasons that a particular student may be motivated to bully. For instance, the bully may enjoy watching a weaker child suffer, like the increased social status that comes from bullying, or covet the money or personal property that he or she can steal or extort from a victim. Children who bully are likely to feel little empathy for their victims and may even feel justified in inflicting hurt because they believe that their victims 'deserve it.'

A common myth about bullies is that they bully others to cover up their own sense of inadequacy or poor self-esteem. It appears that bullies actually possess levels of self-esteem that are about as positive as those of their non-bully peers.

Q: What are the characteristics of a child who is victimized by bullies?

A: There is no single descriptive profile to help schools to identify those students who are at risk for being targeted by bullies. One important indicator, though, is the presence or absence of friends in a child's life. Children who are socially isolated are easier targets for bullies because they lack a friendship network to

back them up and support them against a bully's attacks. A second factor that can predispose a child to be victimized is age. Older children often bully younger children.

There are also two subgroups of bully victims that to present a clearer profile: passive victims and provocative victims. Passive victims may be physically weaker than most classmates, avoid violence and physical horseplay, and be somewhat more anxious than their peers. Lacking friends, these children are an easy target for bullying. Provocative victims may be both anxious and aggressive. They may also have poor social skills and thus tend to irritate or alienate their classmates. Bullies often take pleasure in provoking these provocative victims into an outburst through taunts or teasing, then sit back and watch as the teacher reprimands or punishes the victim for disrupting the class.

Q: What impact does bullying have on its victims?

A: Victims of bullying may experience problems with academics, because they are too preoccupied with the task of avoiding the bully to concentrate the teacher's lecture or school assignment. They may engage in specific strategies to dodge the bully (e.g., feigning illness and being sent to the nurse to avoid gym class) and may even develop an apparent phobia about attending school.

Bullying can also leave a lasting imprint on its victims. Victims of bullying are often socially marginalized to start with, having few if any friends. Unfortunately, as these children are bullied over time, they may experience increased rejection by their peers-who blame the victims for the suffering that they endure at the hands of the bully. In time, these victims too may come to believe that they themselves are responsible for the bullying. Individuals who were chronically bullied as children may show symptoms of depression and poor self-esteem as adults.

Q: What role do bystanders play in helping or preventing bullying?

A: The term 'bystander' suggests that those children who stand on the sidelines and witness incidents of bullying are neutral observers. In most instances, though, bystanders are much more likely to provide encouragement and support to the bully than they are to actively intercede to help the victim (Snell, et al., 2002). Furthermore, in situations in which a group of students is bullying a child, bystanders may actively join in by taunting, teasing, or ostracizing the victim.

Teachers are often surprised when they see a group of otherwise-friendly children egging on a bully or engaging in bullying behaviors themselves. One explanation for why bystanders may cross the line to help bullies is that, as part of a group, bystanders may feel less accountable for their individual actions (Olweus,

1993). Another possibility is that bystanders feel justified in bullying the victim because they have come to believe that he or she 'deserves' such treatment.

Q: Schools are supposed to be well-supervised settings. How could widespread bullying happen there?

A: Because bullying is a covert activity, adults seldom see it occurring. There are other reasons why bullying can go unchallenged in school as well:

- School staff may misinterpret aggressive bullying as harmless physical horseplay and therefore fail to intervene.
- When questioned by adults, victims often deny that bullying is taking place. (Victims may lie about the bullying because the bully is present during the questioning or because they do not believe that the adults in the school will be able to intercede effectively to make the bullying stop.)
- There may be too few supervising adults in those unstructured settings where bullying is most likely to occur (e.g., gym class, lunch room, playground). Or those supervising adults may not be trained to intervene early and assertively whenever they see questionable behavior between children.

Q: What can schools do to stop bullying?

A: All segments of the school community must work together to address the problem of bullying. This means that teachers, administrators, parents, and students need to cooperate as they assess the scope of the bullying problem in their school and come up with ways to respond to it effectively. While every school will adopt an approach to bully prevention that meets its unique needs, all schools would benefit from the following guidelines (Batsche & Knoff, 1994):

- Conduct a thorough building-wide assessment to uncover the extent that bullying is a problem in your school. Use multiple methods to collect information. Consider administering staff surveys and anonymous student surveys, facilitating student and parent focus groups on the topic of bullying, analyzing the pattern of student disciplinary referrals to see if bullying patterns emerge, have adults observe and record bullying behaviors in less-supervised settings such as the cafeteria and on the playground, etc. Pool this information to identify significant patterns of bullying (for example, where and when bullying happens to occur most frequently; which students appear to engage in bullying behavior and which are victimized by bullies, etc.)
- Reach consensus as a staff about how your school defines bullying and when educators should intervene to prevent bullying from occurring. Rates of school bullying drop significantly when all

staff members are able to identify the signs of bullying and agree to intervene consistently whenever they observe unsafe, disrespectful, or hurtful behaviors.

- Compile a 'menu' of appropriate consequences that educators can impose on students who bully. This menu should include lesser consequences that might be given for minor acts of bullying (e.g., mild teasing) and more stringent consequences for more serious or chronic bullying (e.g., inflicting physical harm, harassing a victim for weeks). Train staff to use the consequences-menu to ensure fairness and consistency when they intervene with bullies.

- Establish a policy for contacting the parent(s) of a student who has engaged in bullying. At the parent conference, school staff should attempt to enlist the parent to work with them to stop the student's bullying. If the parent denies that a problem exists or refuses to cooperate to end the child's bullying behavior, the parent should be told clearly that the school will monitor the child's behavior closely and will take appropriate disciplinary steps if future bullying incidents occur.

- Monitor the school's bully-prevention efforts on an ongoing basis to see if they have in fact reduced the amount of bullying among students and improved the emotional climate of the building. The school can use the same monitoring methods to track progress in bully-prevention as were first used to assess the initial seriousness of the bullying problem (e.g., focus groups, surveys, direct observation, tracking of disciplinary referrals). Share these results periodically in the form of a 'progress report' with school staff, parents, and students to build motivation throughout the school community for your building's bully-prevention initiative.

References

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