

## Bullying

Although school bullying is a very old and well-known phenomenon, researchers only began to study bullying systematically in the 1970s (Olweus, 2003). Bullying is defined as *a negative behavior which is intentionally designed to cause real, or threatening injury or discomfort to another individual that may reflect physical harm, psychological harm, or both* (Olweus, 1993). In the wake of both school shootings and lawsuits, numerous state governments mandated that schools take steps to reduce bullying (Cooper & Snell, 2003). South Carolina, for example, passed the Safe Schools Climate Act in 2006 (Safe Schools Climate Act, 2006) that calls for school districts to establish policies that address harassment, intimidation or bullying of a student.

Even though actions vary by state, many schools recognize that the most effective approach to bullying prevention must be inclusive of school staff, parents, students, and community. Bullying occurs over repeated or successive encounters and can be carried out through physical blows but can also take the form of verbal attacks through insults, name calling, and other psychologically damaging words. Boys bully other students more often than girls do, and a relatively large percentage of girls, about 50 percent, report that they are bullied mainly by boys (Olweus, 2003).

While weakness is often thought to be related to physical strength, this is not always the case. The imbalance between the bully and the victim can be related to more subtle differences such as social skills or language facility. Bullying is aimed at a weaker (physically, socially, emotionally, or cognitively) individual and is designed to give the victim feelings of oppression. The feeling of oppression builds up as, by its very nature, bullying happens repeatedly over time (Rigby, 2007). The imbalance in power may be difficult to detect as bullying may be taking place when the observer cannot believe the victim could possibly be bullied by the perpetrator.

The National Council of Urban Boards of Education reported that many students commonly witness other children being bullied, physically or psychologically intimidated or belittled (Croft, 2006). From a survey of 32,000 students, two findings were that more than half of the students said that they had seen children being bullied at least once a month, and almost 40 percent said teachers and schools could not stop the bullying. Bullying has been reported to occur every seven minutes (Manning & Bucher, 2007).

In any given day over 50,000 students will be absent (1/3 of all trancies) from school because of bullying (Bindel, 2006). Research supports a link between bullying and truancy and persistent truancy and a young person's opportunities in later life. Reasons students give for bullying-related truancy include the desire to be where no one could bring harm to them and to remove themselves from environments where there are feelings of being worthless and hated.

A unique and growing type of bullying is cyberbullying. While school officials have begun to attend to the student rumor mill and notes left in bathrooms, the Internet has emerged as a

major forum for bullying (Schreiber, 2006). One in three teenagers and one in six pre-teens have received threats or verbal abuse online. This includes receiving threatening or embarrassing messages, mostly through instant messaging, email, or Website posting. About 60 percent of the messages focus on a student's crush or friendship with a classmate; 38 percent are about physical appearance, such as weight or clothes. Other incidents involve race, religion, or sexuality. The Pew Internet & America Life Project (Joyce, 2007) indicated that about one third of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of menacing behavior online such as receiving threatening messages; having private emails or text messages forwarded without consent; seeing an embarrassing picture posted without permission; or having rumors spread online. The most common form of cyberbullying is taking information thought to be private and placing it across the Internet. The Pew study also indicated that girls are more likely than boys to be targets.

While the typical bully used to torment victims out in the open, in school hallways or playgrounds, spitting out insults and disparaging remarks for anyone to hear and see, bullying now has gone high-tech and anonymous (Tseng, 2006). Some school districts have introduced policies to prohibit cyberbully-

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ing on school computers. The state of New Jersey has initiated a program to train teachers and administrators in Internet safety (Corzine: Train Teachers to Help Children Avoid Web Predators, 2007). Teachers and administrators will be expected to use their training to instruct students, parents, and community groups on the potential dangers that can be found on the Internet.

Bullying today is really an international problem. More than 150,000 students in the United Kingdom have been targets of school bullies because they are gay (Ross, 2007). Two-thirds of lesbian and gay students surveyed indicated that they had experienced homophobic bullying, ranging from verbal abuse to violence and even death threats. About half of the teachers did not intervene when students used homophobic language like "dyke", "queer" or "rug muncher." 41 percent of gay and lesbian students had experienced physical abuse, 17 percent had received death threats and 12 percent had been sexually assaulted. Some students reported that their teachers joined in with the abuse.

A relationship has also been drawn between bullying and suicide (Bullying Is Behind Teen Suicide, 2006). Numerous bullying victims in Japan have overloaded a hotline service

wanting to tell someone how they were bullied at school because they could not tell their families. In one week Childline Japan received over 27,500 calls. Teachers who ignore bullying are to be disciplined and pupils who want to change schools because of bullying are allowed to do so (Doi, 2006).

The cost to society of ignoring bullying is higher than developing anti-bullying strategies. In surveys of several large middle schools, the vast majority of students reported that they had not hit, teased, threatened, excluded, or gossiped maliciously about classmates in the 30 days before the survey (Teicher, 2006). But, a majority also was convinced that their own nonbully status was an exception to the norm. One observation is that bullying continues because the people engaged in it think that everyone else is doing it. *Social norms intervention* is felt to be applicable in dealing with this phenomenon. Students are presented with credible bullying data from their own school, not just state and national data, and come to realize that the behavior is not something everyone is doing and that bullying is not the norm.

Middle and high schools in Ohio report a bullying prevention program that encourages bystanders to help put an end to intimidation and threats (Kranz, 2007). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, developed in Norway, was begun with help from Child Focus, a nonprofit mental health agency based in the community. Components include developing policies and school rules against bullying, developing methods for reporting and recording bullying, identifying hot spots where bullying occurs, on-the-spot interventions by teachers and weekly classroom meetings on bullying issues. Most research shows that bullying begins in the elementary school, slows in the middle school, and re-emerges in the ninth grade. The model includes initiating measures for change at the school, classroom, and individual levels (Olweus, 2003). Recommended steps to address bullying must be proactive, preventive and responsive in nature.

### Resources recommended to better understand bullying:

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence - <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints>,  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Stop Bullying Now! Intervention, Prevention, Tips, and Games - <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov>  
National Youth Violence Prevention Center, Safe Youth - <http://www.safeyouth.org>  
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children - <http://www.childline.org.uk/bullying.asp>, and  
Channing Bete Company - <http://www.channing-bete.com/education/bullying-violence-prevent.html>

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