

School Bullying and Policy Recommendations

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Along with the academic development of school children, officials at local through federal levels are also concerned with their physical, psychological, and emotional health. A problematic experience for many children that can significantly impact development and well-being is bullying.

Bullying

Bullying is defined as repeated acts of aggressive behavior by one or more parties who are in a position of greater power, either socially or physically, than the victim (Nansel et al., 2001). Direct forms of bullying include hitting, teasing, and threatening, while indirect forms include rumor-spreading, social exclusion, friendship manipulation, and cyber-bullying (Rigby, 1996). The underlying purpose of bullying is to intimidate the victim through humiliation, abuse, and fear usually for the sake of establishing dominance or maintaining status (Roberts, 2000).

Prevalence

Children report similar rates of bullying regardless of whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural environments (Nansel et al., 2001). The prevalence of bullying can change with age and level of development. Bullying typically increases during childhood and decreases during late-adolescence. Most studies report a peak in bullying during early to mid-adolescence. In a national study of youth, 9% of students in grades 6 through 10 reported bullying another student once a week or more often during the school term (Nansel et al., 2001).

The Victim

The child who becomes the target of bullying behavior can experience a number of adverse consequences from scratches and bruises to lasting psychological changes. Although residual physical markings are the most apparent, victims of bullying report that the social and emotional consequences are the most problematic (Hazler, 1996). Victimization has been associated with various internalizing disorders such as anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem, which may last into adulthood (Brockenbrough, Cornell, & Loper, 2002). Victims of bullying are more likely to experience headaches, abdominal pain, and fatigue (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004), and may develop eating disorders, particularly adolescent females (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001). Repeated attacks may cause attention-deficit disorder, possibly by way of anticipation and anxiety over the next encounter (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, Puura, 2001). Studies have found that 7% of eighth grade students stay home at least one day a month because of bullying (Foltz-Gray, 1996), and 20% of middle school students experience fear daily and may avoid certain areas of the school environment such as the restrooms (Glew, Rivara, & Feudtner, 2000). Furthermore, victims may blame themselves for the attacks (Carney & Merrell, 2001).

The Bully

Children who engage in bullying are more likely than their peers to also engage in vandalism, fighting, theft, and weapon-carrying (Olweus, 1993). Bullies are more likely than other children and adolescents to engage in frequent heavy drinking and drug use (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, & Rimpela, 2000). They may exhibit poorer academic achievement and demonstrate a dislike of the school environment (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying has also been related to future criminal behavior. In a longitudinal study of male participants, Olweus (1993) found that 60% of bullies in middle school had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 and 40% had three or more convictions. Later in life, bullies perform below their potential in employment settings (NSSC, 1995) and are more likely to display aggression toward their spouses and children (Roberts, 2000). Addressing the causal factors of bullying may therefore have relevance not only for childhood victims but also for other societal concerns.

State and School Policy

Increasing concern

The last two decades have seen an international increase in both research and policy that focus on childhood bullying (Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). In the United States, while schools are governed by an interrelated system of federal and state law, the majority of disciplinary policies are developed at the state and local levels. The primary legislative medium for initiating widespread anti-bullying policy is therefore at the state level (Limber & Small, 2003).

The term “bullying” began to enter state legislation in 1998 (Furlong, Morrison, & Greif, 2003). By 2003, 15 states had passed laws addressing bullying in schools (Limber & Small, 2003) and in 2007, 35 states had enacted anti-bullying legislation (Srabstein, Berkman, & Pyntikova, 2008). While these numbers reflect a growing legislative awareness of bullying, the effect and adequacy of these laws are still limited.

Limited clarity in legislation

Furlong et al. (2003) suggest that a clear definition of bullying in state legislation is necessary for establishing a common understanding at the local level and for avoiding confusion when implementing anti-bullying programs. Furlong recommends a research based definition of bullying be included in state legislation and cites Olweus’s (1993) three primary components of bullying: intentionality, a power imbalance, and repetition. While 15 states had enacted bullying legislation in 2003, none of the statutes included all three components of the definition. Furthermore, 13 additional state representatives in the same year reported having legislation that addressed bullying even though the policies did not contain the term “bullying” (Furlong et al., 2003).

In a review of state legislation, Srabstein et al. (2008) looked at whether state anti-bullying statutes included a clear definition of bullying, stated that bullying should be prohibited, made reference to the implementation of prevention and treatment programs, and asserted the association between bullying and public health risks. In 2007, only 16 states, covering approximately 32% of public school students, had passed laws that addressed these four elements.

Legislators frequently include bullying under another heading such as harassment or assault (Furlong et al., 2003). Of the 35 states with anti-bullying legislation in 2007, 70% had defined bullying, harassment, and/or intimidation together or synonymously (Srabstein et al., 2008). This pattern also occurs at the local level. A survey of Illinois high school administrators found that while most administrators reported a school policy that addressed and defined bullying, half of the administrators reported the bullying policy was included within a larger harassment policy (Macleod, 2008). Statutory definitions of this type capture the aggressive and intentional nature of bullying but lack the important power imbalance and repetition aspects (e.g., mild but repeated verbal attacks) that contribute to the causes and consequences of bullying. Furthermore, anti-harassment policies are often limited to harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, and disability, but bullying is not always connected to these characteristics of the victim (Limber & Small, 2003). Just as anti-harassment policies were necessary to help schools understand and address harassment, anti-bullying policies can help school personnel see the importance of addressing bullying of various types and know that bullying should not be condoned.

A clear definition of bullying that is consistent with research is necessary in state statutes in order to communicate the exact nature of bullying and intended policy implications to local school districts. The causes of bullying behavior and the psychological outcomes for the victim need to be adequately understood for effective interventions to be implemented. This process can only begin by an accurate and standard definition of what constitutes bullying behavior. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) has produced a pamphlet that includes a comprehensive definition of bullying, along with a discussion of the seriousness of the behavior, the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach, and strategies for administrators, teachers, students, and parents. State laws, however, continue to show diverse and partial definitions of the behavior. There is room for both the federal government to influence a nationally consistent and research based definition of bullying and for states to elevate the effectiveness of their laws that are intended to protect children and provide a safe and healthy learning environment.

School interventions

As of 2007, 24 states had legislation either encouraging or requiring local school boards to develop bullying prevention programs (Srabstein et al., 2008). Programs that take a social-ecological perspective and involve the children, parents, and schools tend to be the most effective (Furlong et al., 2003). One approach for addressing bullying in schools is the use of plays and videos to generate classroom discussion. The media presentations should depict different types of bullying (e.g., physical and verbal) and possible responses and should be age appropriate. Role-play activities have been developed for high school students (Smith et al., 2003) and a puppet show has been used for younger children (Limper, 2000). Beale (2001) describes the local development and performance of a play on bullying by a school drama department and suggests that locally produced plays can deal with specific issues that are relevant to a particular school body. The development of a play, and subsequent discussion, can help school personnel become more aware of the extent of bullying at their school. Students are sometimes surprised that their behavior is classified as bullying or are unaware that other students are also bullied and go through the same experiences (Beale, 2001). Teachers can be given materials to facilitate class discussion that include the definition of bullying, types of bullies and bullying, effects of being a bully or a victim, and the role of the observer.

Providing training to school personnel is necessary for effectively addressing school bullying. Training should not only involve teachers, but also administrators, support staff, and volunteers (Limber & Small, 2003). Training materials can be provided through staff development activities and school district websites.

Parents should be included and can become involved in intervention efforts through a variety of ways. Sending newsletters home and performing student plays on bullying at PTA meetings or a parents' evening can raise parental awareness and understanding of contemporary childhood bullying (Beale, 2001).

Schools with more comprehensive policies show lower rates of bullying (Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). The effectiveness is partly due to the policies covering multiple types of bullying and the variety of places that bullying can occur (e.g., stairwells, playgrounds, and buses). Another important effect of extensive programs is that they are an indicator to victims that the harmful and marginalized state of peer victimization is not a tolerated aspect of the school culture. Establishing anti-bullying norms can send victims the message that they belong and can encourage them to pursue the avenues of support that are available through the school's program. A systemic school policy can also provide the silent majority of the school body with a new school culture of accepted attitudes and behaviors for responding to bullying.

Continuing efforts to develop effective intervention programs designed to address bullying are necessary. A complete definition of bullying in state statutes, along with clear policy guidelines, are necessary for the dissemination of anti-bullying conceptualizations into school policies. A visible, comprehensive, and active school response can then address the behavior of the bully, strengthen victims, influence the school body, and involve parents.

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