

Bullying Problems among School Children

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ABSTRACT This paper examined the problems of bullying in schools. The paper is a position paper. The term bullying refers to physical, verbal and psychological attacks intended to induce fear and distress or to inflict physical harm upon victim. Physical attacks between peers were traditionally categorized as rough play and integrated parts of students' culture. The victims of bullying can have a variety of psychological problems such as: low self confidence, feeling of worthlessness; and low self esteem. The study advocates that bullying should not be viewed as an integral part of growing up but as an antisocial behavior associated with public health problems. The authors suggested ways to prevent and stop bullying in our schools.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are claimed to be the safe place for children. Despite these claims, recent school violence has contributed to the perception that few places are safe anymore. Violence at school can have significant impact on the young people, affecting their mental health, academic achievement, and overall socialization and adaptation. When considering the impact of school violence on mental health and adjustment, it is important to keep in mind that violence is not just homicide or serious assault, but also chronic bullying of the young people. Some children may be impacted if they are involved in or witness even a single physical fight, especially if it results in injury, or if they are threatened by someone. Any of these experiences can induce fear and anxiety in young children, affecting their perception of safety and their ability to learn; so much so that the very fabric of what it means to a young child to go to school is disturbed.

Bullying is an interaction in which a dominant individual repeatedly exhibit aggressive behavior intended to cause distress to less dominant individual (Olweus, 1991; Smith and Sharp, 1994). Bullying is a widespread problem in our schools. The behavior encompasses physical aggression, threats, teasing, and harassment. Although it can lead to violence involving weapons, vandalism or physical harm. It is, however, an unaccepted anti-social behavior that is learned through

influences in the environment, e.g. home, school, peer group, even the media. (Andrea and Andrea 2003).

Bully problems are a major source of worry for children. At one time or another, most children will have to deal with this problem. For the child being tormented the effect can be devastating. Losses of self esteem, no longer wanting to go to school, emotional and physical harm are just a few of the results of the peer abuse.

However, parents and teachers have the tendency to consider bullying as part of the development in growing up. Some believe that bullying will better prepare oneself for life by toughening a kid up. In the same vein, teasing behaviours may be considered as a normal developmental characteristic.

If this type of logic and thinking persists, bullying will continue to become an important contributor to youth violence. Bullying is something we need to take seriously as educators and parents. We need not to treat it as normal part of growing up, but as a public health problem.

Bullying is an anti-social behavior that is learned as such, it can be also unlearned or, better yet, prevented in our schools.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is the assertion of power through aggression. Its forms change with age: playground bullying, sexual harassment, gang

attacks, data violence, assault, marital violence, child abuse, workplace harassment and other abuse (Pepler and Craig 1997). In the same vein Nansel et al. (2001) stated that bullying is a physical act i.e., hitting and kicking, verbal attack i.e., name calling and threats, a psychological maneuver i.e., rumours and exclusion, the behaviour is intended to harm or disturb, the behaviour occurs repeatedly overtime and there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one.

Similarly, bullies acquire power over the victims in many ways: by physical size and strength, by status within the peer group, by knowing the victims weaknesses, or by recruiting support from other children, as in group bullying:

Bullying can be physical or verbal. It can be direct (face to face) or indirect, Such as gossip or exclusion (Olweus 1991). With repeated bullying, the bully's dominance over the victim is established and the victim becomes increasingly distressed and fearful.

A bully is someone who directs physical, verbal or psychological aggression or harassment toward others, with the goal of gaining power over dominating another individual. Research indicates that bullying is more prevalent in boys than girls, though this difference decreases when considering indirect aggression such as verbal threats. Bullies tend to be hyperactive, disruptive, impulsive and overactive (Lowenstein 1978; Olweus 1987). Bullies tend to be assertive and easily provoked. They are attracted to situations with aggressive content and have positive attitudes about aggression (Stephenson and Smith 1989). Boys who bully are physically (Olweus 1987). In contrast, girls who bully tend to be physically weaker than girls in their class (Roland 1989). Bullies have little empathy for their victims and show little or no remorse about bullying.

A Victim is someone who repeatedly is exposed to aggression from peers in the form of physical attacks, verbal assaults, or psychological abuse. Victims are more likely to be boys and to be physically weaker than peers. They generally do not have many, if any, good friends and may display poor social skills and academic difficulties in school. On the other hand Charach, Pepler and Ziegler (1995) and Pepler et al. (1997) in their survey revealed that boys and girls are equally likely to report being victimized.

CAUSE OF BULLYING

Some of the literature on bullying suggests that the perpetrators are children frustrated by lack of success in school. They build the reputation using aggressive behaviors against other adolescents who are physically and socially weaker (Fishman et al. 2002).

Similarly kids who bully are often kids who have been victimized themselves. For some, it may be a life experience they are having problems coping with that may leave them feeling that they have no control. For others, it could be a feeling of not fitting in, or don't feel they can meet the expectations of family or school. In order to feel more competent and successful, a child may try to control someone else to get some relief from their own feelings of powerlessness.

On the other hand, studies have equally shown that the family plays a central role in the development of social skills in youth. Parents who are supportive and involve with their children enable them to develop persona and social skills (Rigby 1996). In many cases the bully's formative years are marred by poor parental example or by outright neglect. Many bullies come from homes where their parents are cold or uninvolved or have, in effect, taught their children to use rage and violence to handle problems.

Similarly, according to Patterson (1992) stated that the characteristics of bullies may interact with family conditions that serve to promote bullying. He went further to reveal that the effect of family demographic variables such as income and education of parents on the development of children's aggressive behavior are mediated by family circumstances. This is supported by the Patterson, Reid and Diction (1992) who posited that stress from low income, unemployment, lack of education within the family exacerbated parents' antisocial tendencies, which in turn lead to harsh and inconsistent parental discipline practices. These disciplinary practices may in turn contribute to an increase in children's aggressive behavior patterns.

However, research on aggressive behavior has indicated that children's socialization experiences within the family play a major role in the development of aggressive behavior. Family influences on the development of aggression that have been examined include: family demographics e.g. socio-economic status, parenting techniques e.g. harsh and inconsistent discipline, and parent-

child relationships number of positive and negative interactions. The breakdown of parenting practices and family management may provide the breeding grounds for aggressive behavior problems. It is also indicated that family members directly train the child to perform antisocial behavior by being non contingent in their use of both positive reinforces for prosocial behavior and effective punishment for problematic behavior. The results of these parenting practices are many daily interactions in the family in which aggressive and coercive behaviours are reinforced and prosocial behaviours not attended to. Some of the reinforcement for negative behaviour comes from attending, laughing, or approving of the behaviour, while reinforcement is a result of escape conditioning contingencies. Escape conditioning contingencies occurs when the child uses aggressive or aversive behaviour to terminate an aversive response from another family member. In these interaction when one family member behaves aversively others respond in kind, and an aversive exchange ensues and escalates until one member gives in. because continuation and escalation of the aversive behaviour successfully terminates the other member's aggressive behaviour each family member is likely to use the aversive behaviour on future occasions. In these interactions, the child learns that negative behaviours are successful and overtimes tries to control other family members through coercive means.

In the same vein, the family of the aggressive children is also characterized by harsh and inconsistent punishment practices. Poor and erratic discipline contributes to development of the aggressive behaviour because parents fail to consistently label, track and provide consequences for negative behaviour. Consequently, a large number of children behaviours go unpunished, and some of the behaviour is punished excessively. Furthermore, parents' use of harsh punishment practices may serve to model aggressive and antisocial modes of problem solving and relating to others.

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING ON THE VICTIM

Recent studies have identified important consequences of bullying among school children. It was revealed that children miss school because they fear being bullied. It is also observed that

victim of bullying may stop talking about school or a particular class activity at school. Also youth victimization such as bullying leads to feeling of distress, unhappiness and loneliness, increased social isolation and negative attitude towards school. They feel unpopular and rejected by their peers, they lack social skills, and their relationship with friends are weak. (Farrington 1993).

In the same vein, Victimized children are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes: They are more anxious and insecure; have lower self esteem, are lonely, more likely to be rejected by their peers, and are depressed than non victimized children. This is supported by the studies of Farrington (1993), Craig (1998), and Boulton and Underwood (1992).

Furthermore, Thorbes (2003) posited that victims and bullying are more likely to display several problems-suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, poor general physical health, drug use, poor body image, eating disorders and poor academic performance. Also victims report distant and non-supportive relations with their parents, to have very few close friends and to express positive attitudes towards their teachers and schools (Fishman et al. 2002)

Moreover, (Craig 1998; Olweus 1991), position-ed that generally, majority of children who are victims are passive, anxious, weak, lacking self confidence, unpopular with other children and have low self esteem. Thus victims typically display behaviours that are described as internalizing problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, social phobias). Internalizing problems refers to a range of over controlled behaviours and internal distress. Symptoms of internalizing disorders may include: High level of anxiety, depression, somatic complaints and withdrawal.

On the other hand, peers also suffers from bullying behaviour by feeling group pressure to join in the bullying; merely observing bullying may lead to distress

Bullying also has bad effect on the bullies themselves. If not stopped in childhood, they will likely grow up to bully others in the work place. Also studies reveal that those who had been bullies as children develop behaviour pattern that endured into adult life. They were also more likely to have a criminal record than those who were not bullies.

Also, students who are repeatedly exposed to violence may have specific cognitive and behavioural deficits that affect their attention and

classroom behaviour. In ambiguous situation, these children tend to be hyper vigilant and expect the worst. They may have difficulty relaxing in the learning environment and respond aggressively to perceived hostility from peers or authority figures at school.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

In order to steer children and adolescents away from retorting to violence measures such as bullying, parents and school system need to work together to prevent aggressive behaviour from children and adolescents.

Children's behaviour patterns are first established at home. It is important that parents should start training children early in life to be empathetic which can help to prevent them from turning into bullies in that one of the characteristics of bullies is that they do not consider other peoples feelings. Often the bully does not know how to relate to others, and so he need to be taught how to communicate with others. In other words bullies can be monitored taught to communicate properly and to understand the feelings of others and to treat people with kindness.

The home should be such that is peaceful and conflict free because bullying may be learned by observing high levels of conflict between parents at home. Care need to be taken by parents so that they do not model bullying for their children. Also parents should pay attention to their children's, prosocial behaviours among siblings should be discouraged, when a child uses aggressive or aversive behaviour and it is been reinforced positively the child terns to use such behaviour always at home and at school. The home environment should be stable so as to provide secure upbringing to children. Also parents should not see bullying as part of developmental process.

Similarly, the school have a role to play, in that they are important in shaping children's development as in families, schools must strike a balance between clear, consistent discipline and warm, supportive relationships. The school personnel often ignore bullying, when children who are victimized report to them, they simply look at them as being silly and exaggerates and are told to try to solve their problems. In the case where a teacher is watching one of the students

being bullied, the teachers just look at it as a part of rough play without intervening. The school environment should be such that fosters respect and set high standard for interpersonal behaviour.

For bullying interventions to be effective it must focus beyond the aggressive child and the victim to include peers, school staff, parents and the community. A comprehensive anti-bullying approach can reduce bullying. The central feature of the intervention is clearly stated code of behaviour with consistent and supportive follow-through. It takes considerable time to bring about both attitudinal and behavioural changes among staff students, and parents in the school community. The following sections provide a brief overview of components of an anti-bullying programme.

Parents: Parents meeting and newsletters should inform parents about the problems of bullying. Parents should talk about bullying and be aware of the signs of potential victimization. Communication between parents and the school is essential, as parents are often the first to know that their children are being victimized. Also parents need to learn to reinforce their children's positive behaviour patterns and model appropriate interpersonal interactions. Parents should contact school counselors and ask for help around bullying or victimization concerns. They should also take active role in school programmes to counteract bullying.

Schools: Adult behaviour is crucial to success of anti-bullying initiative. All adults in school must become aware of the extent of bully/ victim problem in their own school and community. School staff should focus on creating a school climate of trust, respect, acceptance and caring. School staff together with parents and students representatives, should be responsible for updating the code of behaviour and its consequences. They should also ensure and enforce students to follow the behaviour guideline. Teachers' attitude are reflected in their behaviour, when adults recognize the problem of bullying and their central role in reducing it, they supervise actively and intervene to stop bullying.

Peers: Peers play a critical role in bullying. Interventions must aim to change attitude behaviours and norms around bullying for children in a school. Under teachers' guidance, students can recognize the problems of bullying and their potential contributions. With teachers support, they can develop strategies for intervening

themselves or seeking adult assistance to stop bullying. Promoting attitude in the peer group which support empathy for victim and condemn aggression will reduce bullying.

Bullies and Victims: Children who are bullies or victims require individual attention. Talks with bullies should emphasize that bullying is not acceptable and point out the consequences established in the code of behaviour. If a group of children are involved in bullying, the bully and bystanders are brought to task. Talks with victims encourage them to speak up and confirm the school's intention to ensure that they are protected from further harassment. Talks with parents inform them of their children's difficulties and enlist their cooperation in disciplining bullying behaviour and or monitoring for further occurrences of bullying and victimization.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to emphasize some dimensions of peer interaction relating to bullying. Children, who involve in bullying, whether as bullies or victims, may have negative attitudes,

Poor social skills and emotional difficulties which begin at home. These problems are transferred to school and peer contexts, where they may be reinforced. The development of antisocial behaviour problems depends on the interaction of the individual characteristics and exposure to risk factors at critical developmental periods. Some factors within the child e.g leadership, intelligence resilience or within the social system e.g a supportive and empathetic adult can protect children from negative experiences. Intervention and prevention programmes need to be developed not only to help the victims of bullying but also the bullies themselves.

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